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THE DICKENS - THACKERAY DEBATE

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Literature at the University of Warwick

December 1972

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth and early twentieth century habit of comparing Dickens and Thackeray sprang from the existence within the early and mid-Victorian consciousness of certain diametrically opposed ideas : empiricism and intuitive Carlylean spirituality; yearning Romantic subjectivism and a belief in objective authoritarianism and duty; and, in literature, realism and the idealism of romance. Reacting against the excesses of the immediate past, the men of the 1830's and 40's were yet unable to ignore the impressions left by these. In particular, they were affected by the scepticism of the empiricists, and this produced in their minds a tension between faith and doubt, which, when suppressed by those unwilling to face their own divided nature, found an outlet in externalised comparisons such as that between Dickens and Thackeray.

In criticism of Dickens in the 30's and 40's, he was separately admired as optimist and attacked as pessimist, but only in the early 50's was the dichotomy of hope and scepticism openly stated, in the shape of his antagonism with Thackeray. In the late 40's, the latter's stylistic purity had seemed more objective than the self-indulgent mannerisms attributed to Dickens, but later, when the centre of contrast shifted to a distinction between optimism and cynicism, the balance inclined in Dickens's favour, though the darker vision of his rival, mirroring the repressed fears of the age, could never be ignored. Many of the other strands of comparison - the ascription to Thackeray of restless self-consciousness and to Dickens of objectivity; the contrast between the real and the ideal instituted by David Masson - related back to this focal point of hope and doubt, which continued

to lie at the heart of the opposition in the 70's and 80's and even in criticism of the 1900's. From the 80's onwards, however, interest in the traditional comparison was declining.

The polarity of Dickensian heart and Thackerayan head reflected an important aspect of nineteenth century experience, but it was often a distorted reflection, since the ideas of Victorianism were being used by writers less conscious of the problems of the time than men such as Carlyle who had created the Victorian ethos. Concepts of optimism, objectivity and realism were more naively and rigidly applied than by the minds (themselves often naïve and inconsistent) which had originally formulated them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Ioan M. Williams
for his stimulating approach to
nineteenth century literature; and to
the library staff of the University of
Warwick, in particular Miss Audrey
Cooper, for their unfailing assistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
ONE. GROUNDS OF CONTROVERSY	14
TWO. DICKENS, 1836 - 48 : PURITY AND MANNERISM	100
THREE. DICKENS AND <u>VANITY FAIR</u> , 1848	145
FOUR. AUTHORITARIAN OPTIMISM : DICKENS AND THACKERAY, 1850 - 70 (1)	171
FIVE. "MEN AS THEY REALLY ARE IN THEMSELVES" : DICKENS AND THACKERAY, 1850 - 70 (2)	229
SIX. DICKENS AND THACKERAY, 1871 - 1922 : CONTINUITY AND CHANGE	273
SEVEN. THE MODERN PERIOD : FROM THE 1930'S TO THE 1970'S	336
CONCLUSION	351
APPENDIX	365
BIBLIOGRAPHY	370

INTRODUCTION

In October 1848 Dickens's closest associate, John Forster, contributing a notice of Dombey and Son (1846 - 48) to the Examiner, endeavoured to check a dangerous new tendency which he had discerned in recent reviews of fiction :

There has been a criticism in vogue lately which consists in praising one writer at the expense of some other writer. You are instructed to admire A principally and primarily because you ought not to admire B. We cannot fall in with this fashion.¹

In spite of the oblique nature of these remarks, Forster could rely upon his readers recognising that "A" was intended to denote Thackeray and "B" Dickens, for when Vanity Fair (1847 - 48) had been published, several critics had cited certain of its qualities as an improvement upon features of Dickens's work which had aroused disapproval during the 40's. It was against this practice that Forster, jealous of his friend's reputation (on which his own to some extent depended) and never well disposed towards Thackeray, was protesting. His objections, however, did not prevent later critics from pursuing the comparison between the two novelists. Only a few months later, the first essay to be devoted entirely to a discussion of their respective characteristics appeared in the English Review, while the overlapping serialisation of Pendennis (November 1848 - November 1850) and David Copperfield (May 1849 - November 1850) led to the production in 1851 of three similar articles, in the North British Review, the Prospective Review and the Times. By that date

¹ Examiner, 28 October 1848, 692.

the author of the second of these could confidently declare that "the ordinary conversation of the day abounds in comparisons between the authors whose recent performances furnish the subject - matter of this article"², and David Masson opened his North British study with the words : "Thackeray and Dickens, Dickens and Thackeray - the two names now almost necessarily go together."³ The comparison which Forster attempted to sweep aside had become an accepted fact of the literary scene.

For more than sixty years after Masson's article, "the two names" continued to "go together". In the early years of this century, George Saintsbury could still refer to their juxtaposition as both "inevitable" and "common"⁴, and Lewis Melville claimed : "The thought of one writer conjures up the other."⁵ As late as 1921 George Santayana felt that : "It is usual to compare Dickens with Thackeray."⁶ At the time of this last statement any such comparison was, in fact, an increasingly rare phenomenon. Santayana himself raised the subject only to dismiss it offhandedly as allowing an importance to Thackeray which he did not possess, and the few critics who later discussed Dickens in relation to Thackeray substantially endorsed this verdict. In the eyes of George Bernard Shaw (1937), Osbert Sitwell (Trio, 1938)

² Prospective Review, May 1851, vii, 157.

³ North British Review, May 1851, xv, 57.

⁴ The English Novel (1913), p. 229.

⁵ Some Aspects of Thackeray (1911 ; rptd. from earlier articles), p.242.

⁶ Soliloquies in England (London, 1922), p. 70 ; rptd. from The Dial (New York), November 1921, lxxi, 547.

and George Orwell (Inside the Whale, 1940), the latter's work was a dusty relic of the past, possessing no relevance for the modern reader, while Dickens's, for all the faults attributed to it, nevertheless excited interest and enthusiasm. With the collapse of Thackeray's reputation, which was complete by the early 20's, the custom of setting him beside his contemporary naturally declined, and in the criticism of the post - Wilsonian era, since 1940, the habit of comparison has died out almost entirely. The name of Thackeray has virtually disappeared from considerations of the more favoured novelist, as a glance at the indexes of books on Dickens published in the 60's will confirm. Parallels with Dostoevsky and Kafka have been of more interest to recent admirers of Dickens than resemblances or differences between Dombey and Son and Vanity Fair, Copperfield and Pendennis. It is not, however, the purpose of this present work to undertake the reversal of this trend, but instead to explore the Dickens - Thackeray comparison in the work of the nineteenth century English critics, and to explain why, throughout the Victorian period, there should have been an interest in placing the two men side by side.

From its beginning, the comparison was used for purposes of contrast not of parallel - or as Saintsbury phrased it, it was "a parallel almost entirely composed of differences."⁷ The postprandial lapsus linguae which led an Oxford don to speak of "Dickery and Thackins" was adopted by Frederic Harrison in the 1850's to express his sense that the two novelists were interchangeable figures whose writings had important features in common⁸, but this was not the general opinion.

⁷ English Novel, p. 229

⁸ Autobiographic Memoirs (2 vols., 1911), 1, 184.

See below, p. 351.

The literary conversation of London, as reported by Masson in 1851, was more typical of mid-Victorian reactions :

As the popular novelists of the day, Dickens and Thackeray, and again, Thackeray and Dickens, divide the public attention. And as the public has learned thus to think of them together, so also . . . it has learned to set off the merits of the one against those of the other One party of readers prefers Dickens . . . another party wears the Thackeray colours... .⁹

Masson made the same point in his British Novelists and their Styles of 1859 :

the two are now so closely associated in the public mind that whenever the one is mentioned the other is thought of Nay, not content with associating them, people have got into the habit of contrasting them and naming them in opposition to each other. There is a Dickens faction, and there is a Thackeray faction ; and there is no debate more common, wherever literary talk goes on, than the debate as to the respective merits of Dickens and Thackeray.¹⁰

Henry Morley, ~~brother of the more famous John~~, looking back in 1881 on an era through which he himself had lived, substantiated Masson's view of the situation : "They were the great novelists of their day, and novel readers took sides in dispute about them . . . by exalting one and running down the other."¹¹ A similar division into factions was also recalled by Thackeray's former son-in-law, Sir Leslie Stephen, in 1903, as part of the Cambridge atmosphere of the 50's : "We had our enthusiasts for Dickens, who had fierce

⁹ North British Review, loc. cit.

¹⁰ British Novelists and their Styles (1859), pp. 234 - 5.

¹¹ English Literature in the Reign of Victoria (Leipzig, 1881), p. 377.

encounters with the partisans of Thackeray."¹² The talk of Londoners and the disputes of the university alike reflected an awareness among Victorian readers of a sharp and irreconcilable separation between their two great novelists.

The majority of critics who followed Masson shared this consciousness of absolute difference. "To the unreflecting," said Samuel Phillips of the Times in 1852, "Thackeray and Dickens represent one school of fiction." But the truth was exactly the reverse: "The two novelists have little or nothing in common."¹³ Sir Archibald Alison, in the first volume (1853) of his History of Europe from the Fall of Napoleon was able to see no distinction between them,¹⁴ but he was quickly rebuked by Theodore Martin in the Westminster Review: "it is absurd to class them as belonging to one school. In matter and in manner they are so thoroughly unlike that . . . we can only attribute the mistake to a limited acquaintance with their works."¹⁵ The prolific novelist and essayist, Margaret Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine of 1855, was equally certain that it was wrong to treat them as literary twins:

Future generations will speak of Dickens and Thackeray as we speak of Pepys and Evelyn, and they are quite as dissimilar Perhaps there are no two men among their host of readers who are further apart from each other¹⁶

¹² Some Early Impressions (1924), p.39; rptd. from National Review, September 1903, xlii, 142.

¹³ Times, 22 December 1852, 8.

¹⁴ History of Europe from the Fall of Napoleon to the Accession of Louis Napoleon (8 vols., 1853 - 59), i, 484.

¹⁵ Westminster Review, April 1853, n. s. iii, 371.

¹⁶ Blackwood's, January 1855, lxxvii, 88.

John Cordy Jeaffreson, in his Novels and Novelists (1858), approached the question from the same assumption of contrast, though he apparently believed that comparisons ought only to be based upon similarity : "the two great novelists of the day are so diametrically opposed, that it is impossible to compare them."¹⁷ Thus Jeaffreson supported the basic proposition that in all essentials Dickens and Thackeray were wholly incompatible.

No one, as Masson pointed out in 1864, felt more keenly than Thackeray himself that there was "a kind of polar opposition between his method and Dickens's."¹⁸ He was conscious that Vanity Fair posed a challenge to Dickens, and during its publication wrote to his mother that he was now "all but at the top of the tree : indeed there if the truth were known and having a great fight up there with Dickens."¹⁹ In 1851 he told Masson, "I quarrel with his Art in many respects"²⁰, and on his second American trip (1855-56), he was reported as making a statement which explicitly acknowledged his works as a deliberate denial of Dickensian values : "Dickens doesn't like me : he knows that my books are a protest against his - that if the one set are true, the other must be false."²¹ These comments reveal the extent to which Thackeray was convinced, not only that to win fame he must engage in public rivalry with Dickens, but also that his own artistic practice constituted a direct assault upon the other's methods and attitudes.

¹⁷ Novels and Novelists (2 vols., 1858), ii, 262.

¹⁸ Macmillan's Magazine, February 1864, ix, 366.

¹⁹ Letters and Private Papers (ed. Gordon N. Ray, 1945-46), ii, 333.

²⁰ Ibid., 772.

²¹ Gordon N. Ray, Thackeray. The Age of Wisdom (1958), p.272, quoting Lippincott's Magazine, viii, 107.

While desiring to be on friendly terms with his fellow author, he could not avoid the knowledge that "we're on different sides of the house."²² With this Dickens would have agreed, but, unlike Thackeray, he never openly admitted the possibility of any comparison between them. Though he criticised Thackeray on several scores, he did not claim that his own writings were in direct opposition to those of his rival. This reticence, it may be hypothesised, was not due to generous forbearance or quiet modesty, but rather sprang from an obsession with his public personality as the Inimitable Dickens. Without this rôle, he was nothing, for he fled all his life from self-examination²³, and could perhaps only assert his identity by means of the parts - popular author, social reformer, editor of periodicals, stage-manager, actor, reader of his own works - which he played for the eyes of the world. Because of this, any hint that another novelist might be set beside him would possibly act as a profound irritant to his nervous sensibility, and the need to preserve his unique place in the public eye would prevent him from deigning to notice that any such pairing had been made. Various oblique contrasts between the two men by Forster in his Examiner reviews of the 50's, always to Thackeray's discredit, and the undignified squabbles which marred the novelists' precarious relationship, can be regarded as Dickens's substitute for entering into odious comparisons.

It would be wrong, however, to consider the divisions between Dickens and Thackeray themselves or between their respective admirers simply as indicating that the Victorians were split into two parties -

²² Ray, op. cit., p. 153, quoting MS. letter from Thackeray to Forster, 1851.

²³ See, for instance, below, pp.70 - 1.

as Masson, Stephen and Morley suggested - for if the novelists were opposed they were also, on Masson's own showing, complementary :

There can be no doubt that the two writers bring out and throw into relief each other's peculiarities - that they are, in some respects, the opposites of each other; and that each is most accurately studied when his differences from the other are noted and scrutinized.²⁴

In 1864, the same critic referred even more clearly to the necessity of maintaining a balance between them :

Fortunate age to have had two such representatives of styles of art the co-existence of which - let us not call it mutual opposition - is everlastingly possible and everlastingly desirable!²⁵

A month earlier, in the Reader, exactly the same point was made by a critic who was either Masson himself or whose thought Masson had adapted :

But, though this habit of talking of the two as rivals has been carried too far - although the two were not so much rivals as contemporaneous examples of distinct styles of literary art, the existence of both of which in any one time is always to be looked for and always to be desired - yet, one cannot help feeling that, for for the moment, by Thackeray's death, the desirable balance is somewhat disturbed.²⁶

In the comments of Morley and Stephen, the opposition between Dickens and Thackeray was treated as purely external, taking the form of public debate. Masson's notion of "co-existence", on the other hand, internalised the discussion. Instead of joining one party

²⁴ British Novelists and their Styles, p. 237.

²⁵ Macmillan's Magazine, 366.

²⁶ Reader, 2 January 1864, 111, 3. Masson was, in fact, editor of this journal.

or the other, the individual should hold both novelists together in his mind and recognise their equal validity. But Masson was almost alone in attempting to preserve such an equilibrium. Most critics were eager to espouse a single side of the argument, and even in the twentieth century Lewis Melville noted that "there are few who will assert that they read with equal pleasure the works of both writers."²⁷ Nevertheless, although it was not developed by the majority of reviewers, the concept of "co-existence" was an important one in terms of the comparison as a whole.

On most occasions when one novelist was preferred, it was because his works seemed to provide a wholesome antidote to some subversive tendency in those of his rival. In terms of the straightforward contrast favoured by the average critic, positive drove out negative. This interpretation of the comparison is in harmony with that myth of the serenely confident Victorians which prevailed amongst early twentieth century writers and which is still carried on in popular histories of the time. Certainly, this picture contains a large amount of truth. Most Victorian critics did express themselves dogmatically, and imposed upon life and art a clear-cut morality of blacks and whites. This is mirrored in the seeming certainty with which they often declared that Dickens was superior to Thackeray and vice-versa.

At the same time, any reading of the literature produced by the prophets, poets and novelists of the period soon dispels the idea that the Victorian age was one of certainty and settled belief. The work too of scholars such as Walter E. Houghton, in The Victorian Frame of Mind, and Basil Willey in his two volumes of nineteenth century studies, has accustomed the modern student to think of the

²⁷ Some Aspects of Thackeray, p.243.

more articulate figures of early and mid-Victorian England as men tormented by inward doubt and insecurity, attempting to reconcile the conclusions reached by the intellect with those offered by intuition, and privately questioning the faith which publicly they championed with vociferous authority. Positive, so far from achieving a decisive victory over negative, was under constant attack from it and the two were in uneasy "co-existence". One natural expression of such conflicts within the individual and within the consciousness of an entire age would be an interest in external polarities which reflected the internal tensions, and this would particularly be the case when inner disturbance was repressed into unconsciousness and men convinced themselves as well as others that their public face was the only reality. The suppressed dualism of their natures would seek a safety-valve in the diametrically opposed persons of other men, and no risk of self-analysis would be involved since the dangerously "fierce encounters" (to quote Stephen) would be placed at a safe distance in the outside world. The Dickens-Thackeray comparison, as well as reflecting external clashes of opinion, had an internal significance of this kind. It certainly allowed the Victorians to assure themselves of the potency of moral law, by an enactment of the banishment of evil by good, but it also bore testimony, in part, to the latent fears of an age divided against itself, and from this it derived much of its strength.

To understand the contrasts which were made between the two novelists it is therefore necessary first to understand the climate of opinion which produced them. If the antagonism between Thackeray and Dickens was of interest to mid-century critics, it was because of attitudes inherited from the men of the 30's and 40's and constituting the basis of Victorianism. The first chapter of this work outlines,

mainly by reference to the writing of those decades, the particular characteristics of Victorian thought which are relevant to the comparison. After this, the criticism itself is considered in relation to these ideas. An opening chapter is given to the reviews of Dickens's work from 1836 to 1849, establishing not only the image in which the novelist was cast by his earliest readers, but also the existence of a dichotomy, ignored by the critics themselves, in reactions to his method and subject-matter. The three succeeding chapters deal with the Dickens - Thackeray opposition, firstly as it manifested itself in the reception accorded to Vanity Fair, and secondly as it evolved during the 50's and 60's. A further chapter considers the differing developments between the death of Dickens in 1870 and the collapse of Thackeray's reputation in the first two decades of the twentieth century - on one side a continuing but less urgent interest in the comparison, on the other a decline, beginning in the latter decades of the century, in the reputation of both authors and a corresponding diminishment of the desire to set out the differences between them. The final chapter outlines very briefly the fate of the comparison during the renaissance of Dickens criticism since the 1940's.

It would be foolish to suppose that, by concentrating on earlier responses to the work of the Victorian novelists, the more sophisticated interpretations given by modern writers are in any way invalidated. The views of Dickens held, for instance, by Edmund Wilson, Jack Lindsay or J. Hillis Miller cannot be treated as misconceptions simply because they are not based on a proper comprehension of the Victorian background. Inevitably, each age must re-create the great masters of the past. Nor can Victorian periodical journalists offer

any aid to the 1970's in respect of critical method, for - at least where Dickens and Thackeray were concerned - the premises upon which they operated were extremely naïve. The justification of research such as that carried out in these pages can for the most part be made only in terms of the history of ideas, moral and philosophical as well as critical and artistic. Nevertheless, the isolation of certain topics which the novelists' original audiences thought important may highlight areas in which the nature of fiction was seen to alter in 1836 and in 1848. It was felt at the time that Dickens and later Thackeray had, for good or for ill, vitally reshaped the English novel, and critics, no matter how outmoded their equipment or how conservative their outlook on life, could not help registering the changes which occurred. The Dickens - Thackeray comparison, as well as providing an account of the relationship between criticism and extra-literary modes of thought in a past age, can assist understanding of the innovations which the two men introduced into English fiction.

PART ONE

THE BACKGROUND

CHAPTER ONE
GROUNDS OF CONTROVERSY

In 1831, John Stuart Mill, in the first of a series of essays published in the Examiner under the title of "The Spirit of the Age", recorded his opinion that no previous time had been so conscious as the present one of its unique place in the history of the world :

The "spirit of the age" is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age.¹

Thomas Carlyle, in the same year, contributed to the Edinburgh Review an article on the "Characteristics" of the age, in which he too drew attention to the unique self-consciousness of the modern world, with its habit of intently 'listening to itself.'² Traditional certainties, he observed, had given way to a mood of doubt, and man was engaged in constant speculation about himself and his place in the universe :

Never since the beginning of Time was there, that we hear or read of, so intensely self-conscious a Society. Our whole relations to the Universe and to our fellow-men have become an Inquiry, a Doubt; nothing will go on of its own accord, and do its function quietly; but all things must be probed into, the whole working of man's world be anatomically studied.³

¹ Examiner, 6 January 1831; rptd. The Spirit of the Age (ed. Frederick A. Von Hayek, Chicago, 1942), p. 1.

² Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, iii (Centenary Edition of Works, ed. H.D. Traill (1896 - 99), xxviii), 22.

³ Ibid., 19.

Both Mill and Carlyle thus isolated self-consciousness as the most important feature of their era, claiming that man, as never before, was preoccupied with the study of his own nature and with that of his surrounding circumstances. "Characteristics" and "The Spirit of the Age", together with Carlyle's earlier "Signs of the Times" (Edinburgh Review, 1829), were themselves embodiments of the self-examination which they discussed.

The early Victorian ethos, on the other hand, evolving in the 30's and 40's through the work of Carlyle himself, John Ruskin, F.D. Maurice and John Sterling, grew out of a distrust for this analytical and introspective temper. A desire to shake off the questioning outlook of science, joined to a distaste for the very different self-consciousness of Romanticism, which was based on the subordination of external reality to the subjective mind, led the Victorians to take refuge in submission to the established order of an objective world ordained by God. Attempting to redirect the current of a doubting age into the mainstream of faith, they frowned upon any opinion or creed which emphasised self-conscious thought. Mistakenly, they endeavoured to ignore the changes which empiricism and Romanticism had wrought upon the English outlook, as if it were possible to set aside the disagreeable consequences of the immediate past in favour of a return to the settled conviction of previous centuries. Carlyle, John Sterling wrote in an 1839 article for the Westminster Review, had been driven by his hatred of inquiry into false praise "of blind ignorance", and envy "of Homer's warriors, or of the peasants who in England, in the nineteenth century after Christ,

are left almost as dark as they!"⁴ Of Teufelsdröckh in Sartor Resartus (1833-34), Sterling likewise complained in 1835 that he would "perhaps be willing to exchange the restless immaturity of our self-consciousness, and the promise of its long three-pangs, for the unawakened undoubting simplicity of the world's childhood", not realising "that, could we go back five thousand years, we should only have the prospect of travelling them again, and arriving at last at the same point at which we stand now."⁵ Life could only be carried on, Sterling recognised, by the means which the present provided, and it was not only undesirable but also impossible to spurn the tools which lay immediately to hand.

(1)

The tendency of the age towards dissection of life in all its aspects was, for Carlyle, a sure proof that the times were out of joint. The taking apart of an organism argued, not a disinterested wish on the part of the anatomiser for pure knowledge, but a sickness requiring treatment in the object anatomised :

The beginning of Inquiry is Disease : all Science, if we consider well, as it must have originated in the feeling of something being wrong, so it is and continues to be but Division, Dismemberment, and partial healing of the wrong.⁶

⁴ "Carlyle's Works", Westminster Review, October 1839, xxxiii, 49.

⁵ Letter to Carlyle, 29 May 1835, quoted by the recipient in his Life of John Sterling (1851 ; Centenary Works, xi), 115.

⁶ "Characteristics", Essays, iii, 2.

Analysis could be considered, at most, only a regrettable necessity, which in an era of doubt could assist in locating the sources of malady, but which, once the cure was effected, would be laid aside. Instruments of morbid surgery were of use to none but sick people :

Metaphysical Speculation, if a necessary evil, is the forerunner of much good. The fever of Scepticism must needs burn itself out, and burn out thereby the Impurities that caused it; then again will there be clearness, health.⁷

Carlyle found himself looking back with regret to a period of instinctive faith, when answers to the eternal question - "What is man, What are the duties of man?" - stood "ready written" and did not require to be sought out by speculation and science⁸. "Had Adam remained in Paradise," he declared, "there had been no Anatomy and no Metaphysics."⁹

Sterling, who held that Paradise would be improved by the admission of anatomy and metaphysics¹⁰, attributed Carlyle's attitude to science to the fact that he was on the recoil "from empirical corruption and mechanic theories of the essentially hyper-mechanical"¹¹, and this claim was borne out by Carlyle's writings. He was haunted by the spectre of an "empirical" philosophy which traced all man's actions to material causes and denied him a spiritual nature. For the nineteenth century in general such belittlement of human dignity

⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ "Carlyle's Works", 41 - 2.

¹¹ Ibid., 49.

was associated with that period which later Leslie Stephen ironically called "the wicked, mechanical, infidel . . . eighteenth century."¹² The material viewpoint of the previous age was condemned, for instance, by G.H. Lewes in 1843 :

When it was maintained that all ideas have their origin in the senses, and not in any intangible, inconceivable entity superadded to those senses, men straightway came to the very false conclusion that man was no better than the brute¹³

Earlier, Coleridge had traced this degraded view of man to the close of the seventeenth century, when :

science . . . put on a selfish and sensual character, and immediate utility, in exclusive reference to the gratification of the wants and appetites of the animal, the vanities and caprices of the social, and the ambition of the political, man was imposed as the test of all intellectual powers and pursuits.¹⁴

The heirs of this debased tradition of regarding man purely as the creature of his own senses were the Utilitarians, against whom the wrath of Carlyle was directed. Bentham, in claiming that man was motivated exclusively by desire of pleasure or fear of pain, had continued the materialistic bias of eighteenth century thought. He had traced all conduct, even that which a traditional estimate would set down to virtue and piety, to "interest-begotten prejudice",

¹² "Coleridge", Hours in a Library (1879; 2nd ed., 1892), iii, 363.

¹³ "The Modern Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy of France", British and Foreign Review, 1843, xv, 357 - 8.

¹⁴ The Statesman's Manual (1816), Appendix C; rptd. Bohn's Standard Library, Biographia Literaria and Two Lay Sermons (1904), p. 346.

thereby exposing, as John Stuart Mill said, "the common tendency of man to make a duty and a virtue of following his self-interest."¹⁵ Mill himself, who agreed with the school of Bentham and Locke that knowledge came only through sensations, rather than with Coleridge that there were "truths . . . cognizable by the mind's inward light, and grounded on intuitive evidence"¹⁶, regarded the discovery of dubious motives underlying human behaviour as Bentham's greatest service to philosophy.

It was because of the doubts cast by empiricism of this kind upon man's spiritual capacities that Carlyle so heartily mistrusted the scientific frame of mind. The Benthamite approach to life, he wrote in 1840, had driven from the world all reverence for God or man :

Witchcraft worshipped at least a living Devil; but this worships a dead iron Devil; no God, not even a Devil! - Whatsoever is noble, divine, inspired, drops thereby out of life. There remains everywhere in life a despicable caput-mortuum; the mechanical hull, all soul fled out of it. How can a man act heroically? The 'Doctrine of Motives' will teach him that it is, under more or less disguise, nothing but a wretched love of Pleasure, fear of Pain; that Hunger, of applause, of cash, of whatsoever victual it may be, is the ultimate fact of man's life. Atheism, in brief The man, I say, is become spiritually a paralytic man; this godlike Universe a dead mechanical steamengine, all working by motives, checks,

¹⁵ "Bentham", Westminster Review, August 1838, xxix; rptd. Mill on Bentham and Coleridge (ed. F.R. Leavis, 1950), p. 89.

¹⁶ "Coleridge", Westminster Review, March 1840, xxxiii; Bentham and Coleridge, p. 109.

balances, and I know not what¹⁷

The horror of the "Doctrine of Motives" for Carlyle was its power of reducing the human being to the status of a machine, functioning by the workings of certain cogs and wheels and wholly obedient to the pull of a lever marked 'self-interest'. Man was treated as if he were the puppet of his own animal desires. No endeavour, however high or heroic it might seem, could any longer be taken at face-value, but must be anatomised and invariably referred to some selfish and material source. Moral choice, the freely-given adherence to universal law, had been replaced by a credulous faith in the determining power of the lowest human wishes : "of Volition, except as the synonym of Desire, we hear nothing; of 'Motives' without any Mover, more than enough."¹⁸ The instinct which prompted a man to perform actions that, though not in his worldly interests, were right, disappeared from life as a motivating power, and existence became a matter of mere calculation and balance as the pleasure derivable from any single act was weighed against the pain. Mill too, though he did not, like Carlyle, think that moral principles derived from any intuitive awareness of a divine "Mover", yet found that Bentham's account of human conduct took no account of conscience :

Man is never recognized by him as a being capable of pursuing spiritual perfection as an end; of desiring, for its own sake, the conformity of his own character to his standard of excellence, without hope of good or fear of evil from other source than his own

¹⁷ On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (lectures delivered 1840, pubd. 1841; Centenary Works, v), 173.

¹⁸ "Characteristics", Essays, iii, 9.

inward consciousness.¹⁹

Here the "standard of excellence" was defined by the individual, not by an external scheme of pre-existent religiously orientated values, but Mill nonetheless believed that man possessed a "spiritual" side and was more than a machine.

In spite of his defence of anatomy and metaphysics, John Sterling was no less certain than Carlyle that the empiricism of Locke, Hume, Hartley and Bentham provided a distorted idea of mankind. Above the conclusions of the intellect there lay a realm of truths which only faith could enter :

Some one breaks off a corner of our nature -- calls it suggestion, or association, or self-interest, or sympathy, or pleasure and pain, or profit and loss, or the nervous system; and lifting up the fragment, says, "Behold! this is the essence of man." As these theories, which all have their plausibility, their use, and their vestige of truth in them, take in but some small grains, but some faint shadows of what man is, therefore the living soul of man, with its longings and capacities of faith, refuses to acknowledge them Of such speculators it is the inevitable and deadly lot that the overpowering consciousness of what is lowest and most chaotic in us, rather than of the higher and brighter -- the spirit-man -- supplies the materials which the intellect works on, from which it draws its thin unbroken clue of speculation.²⁰

It was to Coleridge, of whom he was a disciple in the late 20's, that Sterling ascribed his belief in man's higher destiny. "To

¹⁹ "Bentham", ed. cit., p.66.

²⁰ "Carlyle's Works", Westminster Review, 2.

Coleridge", he wrote in 1836, "I owe education. He taught me . . . that an empirical philosophy is none, that Faith is the highest Reason."²¹ F.D. Maurice, Sterling's contemporary at Cambridge and fellow-member of the "Apostles", traced the basis of his own theological convictions to the same quarter.²² From Coleridge's distinction between intuitive Reason and analytical Understanding²³ the early Victorians derived much of their thinking about the relation of religion to science.

At a far less philosophical level, the distaste for empirical interpretations of human nature, and in particular for the discovery that all behaviour could be traced to self-interested motives, was shared by Dickens, who wrote to Forster in 1849 :

What should you think of this for a notion of a character? 'Yes, that is very true : but now, What's his motive?' I fancy I could make something like it into a kind of amusing and more innocent Pecksniff. 'Well now, yes - no doubt that was a fine thing to do! But now, stop a moment, let us see - What's his motive?'²⁴

Almost immediately afterwards this sketch was utilised, without a great deal of point, in the person of Mr. Wickfield in David Copperfield. This character bore no resemblance to Thackeray, yet it was not, perhaps, entirely coincidental that Dickens should conceive his idea in the year following the completion of Vanity Fair.

²¹ Quoted by J.C. Hare in his Preface to Sterling's Essays and Tales (1848), I, xv.

²² Dedication of The Kingdom of Christ (2nd ed., 1842), I, xxv-vi.

²³ Coleridge, The Friend, *passim*.

²⁴ Quoted by Forster in his Life of Charles Dickens (3 vols., 1871 - 73; ed. J.W.T. Ley, 1928), p. 524.

In that novel Thackeray had shown, like Bentham and Mill, a keen awareness of the selfishness from which apparently virtuous actions could spring. The demure goodness of an Amelia Sedley, when properly investigated, revealed itself as sentimental self-indulgence. In later books, the maternal devotion of Helen Pendennis was partially traceable to sexual jealousy, and the courage of Henry Esmond (1852) in the forlorn cause of the Stuarts stemmed from his hopeless passion for the worthless Beatrix. A remark passed by the cynical and worldly Major Pendennis was true of the entire Thackeray world : "We all have interested motives."²⁵ Dickens, who had not questioned the credentials of Ruth Pinch or Agnes Wickfield, never attacked his contemporary openly on this subject, but he put into the mouth of Mr. Sleary in Hard Times (1854) a refutation of Utilitarianism which might also have served as a reprimand to Thackeray : "there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf - interetht after all."²⁶ While they did not associate Thackeray with the Benthamites, Dickens and Forster certainly did believe that he belonged, or affected to belong, to a social group whose chief characteristic was an indolent scepticism of the type displayed by Eugene Wrayburn. He was a "gentleman", who shared in that "absence of high feelings" manifesting itself in "sneering depreciation of all demonstrations of them", which Mill, in his Autobiography (1873), attributed to the Victorian upper classes.²⁷

Side by side with the dangerous doctrine, supported by Thackeray,

²⁵ Pendennis, Ch. lix, Centenary Biographical edition of Works (1910 - 11), iv, 278.

²⁶ Hard Times, Bk. III, Ch. viii, Gadshill Dickens (1897-1908), xxv, 322.

²⁷ Autobiography, Ch. ii (World's Classics, 1924), p.49.

that man's behaviour was always dictated by self-interest, there existed the equally degrading notion, as inimical to Mill as to Carlyle, that it was also determined by external circumstances, and that man was the prisoner of his environment. Carlyle denied this in "Signs of the Times" :

This deep, paralysed subjection to physical objects comes not from Nature, but from our own unwise mode of viewing Nature If Mechanism, like some glass bell, encircles and imprisons us; if the soul looks forth on a fair heavenly country which it cannot reach, and pines . . . yet the bell is but of glass; 'one bold stroke to break the bell in pieces, and thou art delivered!' Not the invisible world is wanting, for it dwells in man's soul, and this last is still here.²⁸

Carlyle felt that man carried within him the seeds of his own freedom, which, if cultivated, would spring into flower and make of his soul a new Eden. He refused to believe that circumstances of any petty kind could finally triumph over the human spirit, if the latter would only assert itself. Mill likewise found the disproof of determinism in the human will, which could be exerted at any time. Only the Fatalist, he wrote in 1834, held that character was irrevocably fixed by education and surroundings. It was not, of course, to be doubted that these were formative influences, but nor was there any question but that the individual could reshape his nature, if he so desired. The wish to mould one's own identity, so far from being incompatible with the workings of external circumstances, was itself a circumstance "and by no means one of the least influential." Mill's conclusion was thus an optimistic one: "We are exactly as capable of making our own character, if we will, as others are of

making it for us."²⁹ Both he and Carlyle stood at the opposite extreme to the hero of J.A. Froude's The Nemesis of Faith (1848), who claimed that men had no control over their development, since they could only act in accordance with the faculties originally bestowed on them and with "the training which they have received from the men or things among which they have been bred."³⁰ However, the notions of human liberty which Mill and Carlyle opposed to such fatalism were, as will be seen, very different.

The idea of determinism was especially damaging to the reputations of great men, for it denied them the credit for their achievements. The "Doctrine of Motives", as Coleridge had already pointed out, undermined the heroes of the past by ascribing their "efforts and enterprises . . . to this or that paltry view of the most despicable selfishness."³¹ To this suggestion of self-interest was added the supposition, attacked by Carlyle in his 1840 lectures On Heroes, that history's outstanding figures were created by the needs of the age in which they lived rather than themselves acting as the visionaries and prophets who first made the age aware that it had any such needs :

This . . . is an age that as it were denies the existence of great men; denies the desirableness of great men. Show our critics a great man, a Luther for example, they begin to what they call 'account' for him; not to worship him, but take the dimensions of him, - and bring him out to be a little kind of man! He was the 'creature of the

²⁹ A System of Logic (1834; 10th ed., 2 vols., 1879), ii, 425 - 6.

³⁰ The Nemesis of Faith (rptd. 1969 from 2nd ed. of 1849), p. 92.

³¹ The Statesman's Manual (1904, Bohn ed.), p. 318.

Time', they say; the Time called him forth, the Time did everything, he nothing - but what we the little critic could have done too! ³²

Wishing to acclaim the great leaders by whom the course of events could be decisively influenced, Carlyle was confronted instead with a scientific method which saw in such men simply the helpless tools of an impersonal historical process. They were no more than parts of a machine. Under the new dispensation all human beings were equally slaves to the "force of circumstances", "leashed together, uniform in dress and movement, like the rowers of some boundless galley"³³, or as the eponymous hero of Maurice's novel, Eustace Conway (1834), phrased it, "going quietly round in a mill"³⁴, presumably like mindless donkeys. Carlyle steadfastly refused to believe this, and exalted the Promethean hero who in all ages and all spheres of life had brought down the fire from heaven to give animation to his less inspired brethren upon earth. But at the same time he wished to extend the definition of heroism to include all "believing" men, every "god-created soul which will be true to its origin" :

For as the highest Gospel was a Biography, so is the Life of every good man still an indubitable Gospel, and preaches . . . these gladdest tidings :
 "Man is heaven-born; not the thrall of Circumstances, of Necessity, but the victorious subduer thereof: behold how he can become the 'Announcer of himself and of his Freedom.'" ³⁵

Clearly, the "Freedom" which man possessed was dependent upon his

³² On Heroes, Works, v, 12.

³³ "Signs of the Times", Essays, ii, 79.

³⁴ Eustace Conway (3 vols., 1834), ii, 107.

³⁵ "Boswell's Life of Johnson", Fraser's Magazine, 1832; Essays, iii, 90.

obedience to universal moral law. Only by acknowledging the divine spark within him, his share in the immensity of the great "Mover", could he fulfil his spiritual potential and so prove himself superior to the trappings of worldly life by which the man of mere dull clay was imprisoned. It was in this affirmation of the eternal spirit which animated and directed mortal existence that the hero revealed himself. For Mill, on the other hand, no such religious impulse entered into the assertion of the human will. The decision to break the hold of circumstances was wholly internal, proceeding from the intellect, not from an instinctive sense of being in harmony with the infinite.

The question of the extent to which man was free was especially urgent in the early Victorian period because of the great power which social conditions appeared to be assuming over his conduct. The growth of industrial cities like Dickens's Coketown, in which, amidst squalor and vice, poor men, placed in bondage to iron machines, seemed to have no purpose beyond performance of the work demanded by their masters; the conformity and narrowness of middle-class opinion, and its power to exclude any who dared oppose its decrees; the increasing interference of the State in the ordinary citizen's affairs, and the rise of government 'machinery' of which no one understood the workings and which, like the Circumlocution Office, developed a life of its own quite independently from the politicians and Civil Servants who supposedly operated it; these, among other factors, created a sense that man was the creature not of an arbitrary and cosmic Fate, as in tragedy, but of a social system which he himself had constructed. Carlyle, for instance, remarked in 1829 upon the

humiliating sway which the materialistic climate of the time held over the individual :

Wonderful 'Force of Public Opinion'! We must act and walk in all points as it prescribes; follow the traffic it bids us, realise the sum of money, the degree of 'influence' it expects of us, or we shall be lightly esteemed; certain mouthfuls of articulate wind will be blown at us, and this what mortal courage can front?³⁶

Carlyle's fear was that the values of a society which considered nothing important beyond worldly reputation would stifle moral perception : "This and that may be right and true; but we must not do it."³⁷ Exactly thirty years later, in On Liberty, Mill was concerned that the rigid application of authoritarian standards of what was "right and true", which Carlyle had done much to encourage, had itself become one of the circumstances restricting human freedom.³⁸ The inflexibility of mid-Victorian morality discouraged independent thought and erased eccentricity, while at the same time government, acting as "the organ of the tendencies and instincts of masses",³⁹ smothered individual opinions and desires. Mankind's new ideal, in this age of the 'mass' voice, was to attain a general level of mediocrity :

to be without any marked character; to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady's foot, every part of human nature which stands out prominently, and tends to make the person markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity.⁴⁰

³⁶ "Signs of the Times", 79.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See below, pp. 45 - 6.

³⁹ On Liberty (1859; ed. R.B. McCallum, Oxford, 1946), p.58.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 62.

To combat this situation Mill called for a reaffirmation of individual personality. " 'Pagan self-assertion' ", he reminded his readers, "is one of the elements of human worth, as well as 'Christian self-denial'".⁴¹ This emphasis upon the importance of each man developing his own unique identity was totally opposed to the liberty of the Carlylean hero, for, once again, Mill was thinking in terms of a world without a "Mover". While Carlyle claimed that freedom lay in remaining true to man's common origin in God, Mill believed that it consisted in truth to those features of one's character which were shared by no one else. Carlyle stressed the universal, Mill the individual.

Charles Kingsley, concerned with the problem of how the human soul was to sustain itself amidst the horrors of life in the great city slums, inclined to Carlyle's opinion that man could only conquer circumstances by fidelity to his divine birth. He could find in the lives of the suffering poor no possibility of transcendence save that offered by the "Christian self-denial" which Mill found so limiting. The account given in Alton Locke (1850) of the piety and unselfishness, maintained under the greatest hardship, of the two lower-class girls, Ellen and Lizzie, dramatised his belief that in the enactment of Christian values alone lay the potential superiority of the spirit to its physical surroundings. In the mouth of Sandy Mackaye was placed a preface to the scene of their poverty, drawing the appropriate moral :

Is not the vera idea of the classic tragedy defined to be, man conquered by circumstance? Can we see it there? And the vera idea of the modern tragedy,

⁴¹ Ibid., p.55

man conquering circumstance? and I'll show you that, too - in many a garret where no eye but the gude God's enters, to see the patience, and the fortitude, and the self-sacrifice, and the love stronger than death, that's shining in thae dark places o' the earth.⁴²

Kingsley could do no more than counsel faith and endurance as the means by which the spark of humanity could be preserved amidst the terrifying circumstances of urban life. If the heart remained conscious of its affinity with Christ its integrity could never be destroyed. This was a creed which could be extended to all men, regardless of class, assuring them of their capacity for ultimate triumph over all pressures of environment.

The fiction of Thackeray, by contrast, offered no examples of Christian fortitude, or of "pagan self-assertion" or heroic will. In The Legend of the Rhine (1844), for instance, his narrator was gently ironical at the expense of the hero-worship of Carlyle, and of those romantic novelists who contrived that circumstances should always be subservient to their protagonists: "Depend upon it there is something we do not wot of in that mysterious overcoming of circumstances by great individuals"⁴³. His own characters were capable of asserting themselves neither against events nor against their own worst selves. Mr. Sedley, in Vanity Fair, allowed himself to be broken by his business misfortunes, possessing no identity outside that conferred upon him by his public rôle in the world of commerce. The weak-willed Pendennis was carried by his upbringing, his environment and his first disastrous experience of love into a cynicism as little the product of conscious moral choice as his original sentimentality. Even Becky, who gave the illusion of freedom (though of an

⁴² Alton Locke, Ch. viii, Collected Edition of Works (1880-89), iii, 95.

⁴³ Centenary Biographical ed., xxiv, 436 - 7.

immoral kind), could only define her personality, like all Thackeray's "snobs", in terms of the hollow social splendours to which she aspired. The successful scaling of the upper class barriers by a girl with no advantages of birth or fortune was not a proof of her power over circumstances, but rather of her inability to find for herself any way of life other than that determined by the false values of a materialistic civilisation. She was at the same time the victim of her own internal composition, for her plots and contrivances sprang not only from ambition but also from a need for constant excitement, so that when, at Pumpnickel, she no longer had an end for which to scheme, she was compelled to fall back upon the stimulation of the roulette-table and the brandy-bottle. The vital self-sufficient Becky, "heroine" of a deliberately non-Carlylean "novel without a hero", was as much the dupe of her animal impulses and the creature of her surroundings as any of the apparently feebler characters who, like the drooping Amelia, bowed helplessly before the shocks of life. The famous conclusion to Vanity Fair - "Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out." - reflected the author's conviction of man's universal weakness. Assigning a decisive influence to external conditions, as to motives of self-interest, and having little faith in the existence of strong moral principle, Thackeray, like the empiricists, reduced man to a powerless prisoner of material conditions.

Dickens, on the other hand, attached greater importance to the spiritual and moral aspects of human nature. The figure of Oliver Twist, he declared in 1841, was designed to show "the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last", while in Nancy the prostitute (whom Thackeray had branded

"the most unreal fantastical personage possible"⁴⁴, because she was portrayed in a manner false to her environment) he claimed to have depicted the truth which lingered on amidst even the most squalid conditions.⁴⁵ These characters, like the Ellen and Lizzie of Kingsley (who was certainly influenced by Dickens in his treatment of common life), were emblems of the "god-created soul" which, in spite of pressures from without, remained "true to its origin". The belief that even God's lowliest creature was capable of retaining his moral sense in the most degraded circumstances was an essential part of Dickens's vision, as he informed an American audience in 1842 :

I have always had, and always shall have, an invincible repugnance to that mole-eyed philosophy which loves the darkness, and winks and scowls in the light. I believe that Virtue shows quite as well in rags and patches as she does in purple and fine linen. I believe that she and every beautiful object in external nature, claim some sympathy in the breast of the poorest man who breaks his scanty loaf of daily bread I believe that she dwells rather oftener in alleys and by-ways than she does in courts and palaces, and that it is good, and pleasant, and profitable to track her out. . . . [T]hose rejected ones whom the world has too long forgotten . . . have the same elements and capacities of goodness as yourselves, they are moulded in the same form, and made of the same clay; and though ten times worse than you, may, in having retained anything of their original nature amidst the trials and distresses of their condition, be really ten times better.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Going to See a Man Hanged" (Fraser's Magazine, 1840), Centenary Biographical ed., xxvi, 427.

⁴⁵ Preface to 3rd ed. (1841) of Oliver Twist, Clarendon ed. (ed. K. Tillotson, 1966), pp. lxi, lxx.

⁴⁶ Speeches of Charles Dickens (ed. K.J. Fielding, Oxford, 1960), pp. 19-20.

This faith in "original" virtue and its survival in a hostile world was several times stated by Dickens to be the animating impulse of his work. The novels of the 50's, no less than Oliver Twist (1837 - 39), embodied the same creed. The force of circumstances was refuted in the victory of Esther Summerson's goodness over the supposedly guilty heritage of her illegitimate birth, in the virtual freedom of Amy Dorrit from the taint of the Marshalsea, and in the enduring love of Stephen Blackpool and Rachel in the midst of Coketown's inhuman squalor. In each of these stories Dickens was constant in his antagonism to "mole-eyed" cynicism.

His comic characters too provided pictures of the defeat of circumstance. Thackeray was particularly interested as a novelist in the wearing-down of character by time. In Vanity Fair the alternation of the stories of the two "heroines" involved the periodical disappearance of Amelia, so that at each of her returns the reader, feeling that a long time had elapsed since he last saw her (an effect which would have been enhanced by serial publication), noted with greater consciousness the alterations which had taken place in her, as she passed from innocent and joyful girlhood into the sadness and grey hairs of later years. A similar process of ageing took place in Colonel Newcome, but the humorous characters of Dickens displayed no such subservience to time. In Copperfield, the entries of Micawber could be awaited in perfect confidence that the character would be exactly the same as he had been in every one of his earlier scenes. So far from being disheartened and defeated by his setbacks (as Mr. Sedley was), he achieved in Dickens's hands a glorification of his own personality through the very conditions of poverty which should have flattened him. His famous catch-phrase,

instead of being a faint-hearted expression of hopes that would never be fulfilled, was an affirmation, not only of the belief that something would turn up, but also, by virtue of its incessant repetition, a declaration of its user's unique individuality. Sairey Gamp, employing her pattens and umbrella as well as the fictional Mrs. Harris, gave a similarly endless performance of her own immutable identity. These great Dickensian grotesques anticipated the "pagan self-assertion" championed by Mill. They lived within the closed circle of their personalities, immune from time and circumstance, while the more everyday personages of Thackeray were swept irresistibly along in the stream of life.

At the same time Dickens recognised that nineteenth century man was in grave peril of being acted upon rather than acting. Arthur Clennam in Little Dorrit (1855 - 57) was weakened by the Calvinist atmosphere of his childhood. The workmen of Coketown were relegated to the impersonal status of "hands" by the operations of capitalists such as Josiah Bounderby, while men like Mr. Dombey and Sir Leicester Dedlock, in company with Becky and the "snobs" of Thackeray, permitted the values of the world to dictate their attitudes and to suppress human feeling. Richard Carstone withered away in the stale climate of Chancery, and Little Dorrit's father, brother and sister were corrupted by their contact with the prison. In these two latter cases, however, Dickens indicated that the failure was due to moral weakness, and at all times he balanced his studies of degeneration with accounts of triumph on which he generally bestowed his final word.

There was, nevertheless, an ambiguity in Dickens's treatment of the relationship between character and environment. The former clearly could not exist without the latter. Micawber might show pagan

self-assertiveness, but he was still dependent upon his low circumstances for an identity. His catchphrase was meaningless without the background of impoverishment against which it affirmed his irrepressibility. This inseparability between the human personality and its surroundings was typical of Dickens. Did Daniel Quilp spring like a stunted weed from the dockside wasteland, or was the desolate landscape in some way an offshoot from his own dry deformity? Were Krook and Smallweed products of the Chancery fog, or partial causes of it? And in a world where men became objects - Grandfather Smallweed treated like a cushion - and objects, like Sairey's umbrella or Joe Gargery's hat, assumed animation, could it truly be claimed that mankind was in control of either itself or of the physical world around it? Dickens, while publicly expressing his certainty of the power which the soul exercised over circumstances, had private doubts, conscious or unconscious, which issued in the distorted shapes assumed by many of his creations. Highly developed individualism was imposed upon them by external pressures, and was not the result of free choice. Thus Wemmick, in Great Expectations (1859 - 60), dehumanised by his daytime existence in the office of Jaggers, could only recreate his humanity each evening by retreating into his Castle at Walworth. His eccentricity was the direct outcome of his restrictive situation. Even this half-victory over society was accomplished only at the cost of his capacity for straightforward utterance of his emotions, as was made comically plain in his indirect manner of communicating to Pip his impending marriage :

"Holloa! Here's a church! . . . Let's go in! Holloa! . . . Here's Miss Skiffins! Let's have a wedding."⁴⁷ In Dickens's humorous

⁴⁷ Great Expectations, Ch. lv (Gadshill Dickens, xxi), p.529.

and grotesque figures, particularly those from Bleak House (1852 - 53) onwards, strongly-marked character was not simply a declaration of freedom from the machinery of contemporary social life, but also an acknowledgement of the ability of that machinery to "maim by compression" (in Mill's words) and to determine even individuality by forcing it to flow within a very narrow channel.

Thus, according to which parts of his work were most emphasised, Dickens could appear to the reader interested only in clear-cut attitudes either as optimist, exalting the strength of the human spirit, or pessimist, painting man crushed and deformed by a grimly mechanistic world. Taking an overall view of his novels, on the other hand, it is impossible to maintain that he committed himself wholly either to the ideal of man's freedom or to the doctrine of circumstances. His position was ambivalent.

This mixture of hope and scepticism was to be found in other writers. Carlyle, in the same essay quoted above in which he proclaimed that man was "not the thrall of Circumstances", painted a darkly fatalistic picture of human existence, in which the mass of mankind appeared as blind sheep who could only be guided aright by the great man. Heroism, it seemed, was very much the exception to the rule:

Amid those dull millions, who, as a dull flock,
roll hither and thither, whithersoever they are
led; and seem all sightless and slavish, accom-
plishing, attempting little save what the animal
instinct in its somewhat higher kind might teach,
To keep themselves and their young ones alive, -
are scattered here and there superior natures,
whose eye is not destitute of free vision, nor
their heart of free volition. These latter,
therefore, examine and determine, not what others

do, but what it is right to do; towards which, and which only, will they, with such force as is given them, resolutely endeavour : for if the Machine, living or inanimate, is merely fed, or desires to be fed, and so works ; the Person can will, and so do. These are properly our Men, our Great men; the guides of the dull host, - which follows them as by an irrevocable decree. They are the chosen of the world. . . . while others hovered and swam along, in the grand Vanity - Fair of the world, blinded by the mere Shows of things, these saw into the Things themselves, and could walk as men having an eternal loadstar⁴⁸

In this bitter and pessimistic passage Carlyle assigned the larger part of the human race to a state of near-vegetation. While clinging to the ideal of man's potential divinity, he was agreeing with the Benthamites that in practice most persons were animals motivated by physical instinct and machines without a moral will. Like Maurice's Eustace Conway, who wrote, "Reason teaches me to believe in the doctrine of man's perfectibility - experience, to laugh at it"⁴⁹, Carlyle found his hopes for man negated by his observation of human weakness. His optimism expressed itself in hero-worship, his doubts in an anticipation of the unheroic world of Vanity Fair.

As a result of this awareness of the darker side of life Victorian optimism was not facile. It was precisely because man was so open to moral stupidity, of the type condemned by Carlyle in the passage quoted above, and to outright sin, that his attention must be taken away from the purely material interpretations of his nature provided by the scientific analyses of the empiricist and the

⁴⁸ "Boswell's Life of Johnson", Essays, iii, 89.

⁴⁹ Eustace Conway, ii, 310.

determinist, and focussed on his spiritual aspects. He must be reminded of the lower elements in his character only in order that he might rise above them, or as Tennyson phrased it, "Move upward, working out the beast".⁵⁰ The same thought was uttered by Carlyle in 1832: "What, indeed, is man's life generally but a kind of beast-godhood; the god in us triumphing more and more over the beast; striving more and more to subdue it under his feet?"⁵¹ And again in 1840: "We may pause in sorrow and silence over the depths of darkness that are in man, if we rejoice in the heights of purer vision he has attained to."⁵² Modern thought, Carlyle decided, had paid too much attention to the beast, inducing a mood of self-distrust, and too little to the god, and it was for this reason that he evinced such deep hostility to the self-conscious questionings of his time, and argued for the superiority of intuition over science. Yet, though he and John Sterling voiced their "faith in the imperishable dignity of man"⁵³, they could not ignore the conclusions of the intellect which called on them to take a less elevated view. Though Dickens, in a *Little Nell* or a *Florence Dombey*, might suggest that there were mortal beings totally devoid of sin or folly, speculation and "experience" indicated otherwise. Nor did the early Victorians suppose that perfectibility was easy of attainment even for those who truly desired it. The Christianity of Kingsley's *Ellen and Lizzie* involved a re-enactment of the sufferings of Christ himself, while all around lay the snares of Satan. Life was a *Pilgrim's Progress* attended with the utmost

⁵⁰ *In Memoriam* (1850), cxviii, line 27, *Poems* (ed. Ricks, 1969), p.970.

⁵¹ "Boswell's Life of Johnson", 75.

⁵² *On Heroes*, *Works*, v, 4.

⁵³ "Signs of the Times", *Essays*, ii, 80.

difficulty, and the figure of the hero was to be seen in a constant attitude of struggle.

The gap between empiricism and this spiritualised vision of human experience remained unbridged. Even at the beginning of this century, Leslie Stephen still needed to voice a wish "that the time will come of true reconciliation between faith and science, or the imagination and the reason, or whatever the right phrase may be, which has been the topic of so many controversies."⁵⁴ These words indicate the extent to which the Victorians, under the influence of Coleridge and Carlyle, had become accustomed to thinking in terms of two opposed and apparently incompatible interpretations of life. There was "a natural hostility", wrote John Stuart Mill in the 70's, between, on one side, the man who insisted upon probing the basis of existing creeds, and, on the other, the upholders of "a philosophy which is addicted to holding up favourite doctrines as intuitive truths, and deems intuition to be the voice of Nature and of God, speaking with an authority higher than that of our reason."⁵⁵ It was this clash of opinions that, in 1839, caused Sterling to comment :

Knowledge without belief, and belief without knowledge, divide in the main the English world between them. The apparent exceptions are generally cases of compromise, where men are content to half-believe one thing, and half-say another.⁵⁶

The inevitable result of a division between emotion and intelligence, intuition and analysis, was a race of half-men, either committed to a single side of the controversy or paying lip-service to one set of opinions while keeping a place in their thoughts for the

⁵⁴ Some Early Impressions, p.191; National Review, December 1903, xlii, 581.

⁵⁵ Autobiography, Ch. vii (World's Classics ed.), p.232.

⁵⁶ "Carlyle's Works", Westminster Review, 1.

other. Between those who accepted without demur the traditional faith of their ancestors ("belief without knowledge") and those who, on purely rational grounds ("Knowledge without belief"), questioned the old ways of looking at the world, there existed a third party who, following one group in public, in private gave a certain amount of credence to the propositions of the other. Sterling seems to have meant, though the point was not clearly made, that faith was in many cases only an external display, concealing serious doubt, but he may also have intended to include in his argument the reverse case of the sceptic whose sneering speeches gave no hint of the yearnings of his heart. It was the former situation which was apparently uppermost in his mind, however, when he came to ponder a disquieting and unanswerable question about the sincerity of his contemporaries : "Semi-sincere persuasions, semi-candid declarations, make up our limbo of public opinion. There is often, perhaps most often, heart in the words; but often too - how often who dare ask? within the heart a lie."⁵⁷ To the twentieth century reader, this looks like a description of hypocrisy, and no doubt this was a factor in forming the attitudes of Victorian England. Yet it would be more accurate to see in the inconsistencies and shiftings of ground discerned by Sterling, as in the tension between pessimism and optimism in the outlooks of Eustace Conway and Carlyle, the inevitable manifestations of unease and uncertainty in an age of shaken faith. Belief in God and man was maintained with difficulty, and scepticism persisted in breaking through the surface of assurance.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

(ii)

F.D. Maurice was as anxious as Sterling and Carlyle that man's nature should not be depicted as entirely bestial, but he was also eager to avoid the opposite extreme of discovering in humanity a co-equal of God. To each volume of Eustace Conway he prefixed a quotation from Pascal:

Il est dangereux de trop faire voir à l'homme
combien il est égal aux bêtes, sans lui montrer
sa grandeur. Il est encore dangereux de lui faire
trop voir sa grandeur, sans sa bassesse. Il est
encore plus dangereux de lui laisser ignorer l'un
et l'autre. Mais il est très avantageux de lui
représenter l'un et l'autre.

The story of Eustace Conway himself was designed to exemplify this text, showing him first ensnared by Benthamism and then, in reaction against its tenets, taking up the equally deluded position of the Romantic idealists, who held that man, so far from being a brute or a machine, possessed in his own powers of mind the creative centre of the world. This doctrine, embodied in the attempt of the Byronic hero to subdue the external world to himself and render the individual consciousness the measure of all things, was, for Maurice, most associated with the poetry of Shelley, whose Prometheus Unbound (1820) was admired by Conway, in the second phase of his life, as "so splendid an assertion of the majesty of the human will."⁵⁸ Initiated by a German transcendentalist, Herr Kreutzner, into the mysteries of Promethean assertion, Conway came to believe that in himself, and not in some God hidden in the impenetrable vagueness of the Universe", lay "the Principle and Soul of the World."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Eustace Conway, iii, 59 - 60.

⁵⁹ Ibid., ii, 196 - 7.

When submitted to the instinctive Christianity of his sister, and to the reasonings of the Coleridgean clergyman, Wilmot, this enthronement of human intellect was inevitably exposed as presumptuous. Honoria Conway dismissed the idea that man could rise above the vanities of the world by an act of will alone, since she herself felt that she possessed no "strength or wisdom, sufficient even to resist the slightest temptation."⁶⁰ Wilmot likewise repudiated the supremacy of man's mind, recalling how Shelley, ostensibly a Pantheist, had not been able to brook the notion that the spirit which stirred so strongly within him was no greater than that which animated trees and flowers, and so had been driven misguidedly to exalt his own spirit as the source of all others :

instead of entering into the system, he took the system into himself; he made his own soul the soul of the universe; he conceived a divinity who lived, moved, and had his being within him; and he remained himself the real invisible, inconceivable, inapproachable sovereign.⁶¹

Wilmot maintained, in opposition to Shelley and the transcendentalists, that man could not stand by himself, but must depend upon God, without Whom he was a moral cipher: "we are not men unless we are living free, and . . . we are not free unless we are living in subjection to the law which made us so."⁶² Romantic egocentricity, arising out of the need to free man from the tyranny of the physical world outside himself, caused a return upon a religious creed which was as restrictive as the beliefs of the Fatalist.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 240.

⁶¹ Ibid., 111, 109-10.

⁶² Ibid., 287.

A year earlier than Eustace Conway, John Sterling's novel, Arthur Coningsby, had preached the same views, again with reference to Shelley. A painting at the château of Coningsby's mistress, Victoria de Valence, plainly contrasted the strength of divinity with the weakness of mankind :

A man, with the awful aspect of a god, was seated on a rock, in an attitude of intent contemplation, and with his stern eyes fixed on a rod that stood upright in a cleft near him, and from the top of which a brilliant flame gushed, and supplied the only light of the picture. In the middle distance, beneath an over-hanging cliff, appeared a human figure, fashioned apparently of clay, and supported on a rude pedestal. The expression of the living form, still more than his gigantic proportions, indicated that he was designed as a being of a different race from that which had afforded the model of the inanimate image. From this representation, it was not difficult to discover that the painter had in view the subject of Prometheus after his seizure of the celestial fire, and before his communication of it to man. ⁶³

Prometheus, Sterling was reminding his readers, had been a Titan and a demi-god. It would be wrong to argue that ordinary mortals could emulate him, and be the workers of their own freedom by an assertion of will. Even he, after all, had been punished. The myth of Prometheus thus became, in Sterling's hands, a symbolic representation of man's reliance upon God. Only when the spark fell from heaven could "inanimate" clay be given meaningful existence. This was made perfectly clear by the insight granted to Madame de Valence on her deathbed :

we seek in vain to construct for ourselves a binding and supporting law out of our own tastes, impulses, and notions, while we turn from that which exists

⁶³ Arthur Coningsby (3 vols., 1833), iii, 93-94.

without us, based eternally in the Being of God, and reflected in every human heart. We are insufficient to fulfil its obligations; but shall find, if only we seek, assistance from One in whom, with no mixture of our weakness, there is inexhaustible charity for all our failings.⁶⁴

Ignoring his mistress's warnings, Coningsby, at the end of the novel, ranged the world in Byronic isolation and torment. Unable to feel the presence of religious faith within him, though he admired the splendour of its external symbolism, he was thrown back upon sterile self-centredness: "mean and barren as the mind may be, I had rather apply myself to it . . . than be busied about things around me."⁶⁵ Promethean individualism was doomed to fruitlessness. Only in submission to God could man feel himself to be complete.

This authoritarianism again owed much to Coleridge, who had condemned Satanic assertion of the will, citing Napoleon as its most recent proponent, and had contrasted it with the conscience, which was "an experience . . . of the coincidence of the human will with reason and religion."⁶⁶ The decisions of the individual conscience would find objective support in the authority of the Bible, which "contained rules and assistances for all conditions of men under all circumstances" and afforded to the humblest person "all knowledge requisite for a right performance of his duty as a man and a Christian."⁶⁷ Thus, Coleridge believed that the intellect was to be employed only as a means of establishing truths already hallowed by

⁶⁴ Ibid., 353.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 375, 377.

⁶⁶ The Statesman's Manual, Appendix C (1904 Bohn ed.), pp. 341 - 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 307 - 8.

age rather than of striving towards new ones. From him both Sterling and Maurice inherited a trust in the joint infallibility of the conscience and the Bible. Coningsby was given valuable counsel (which he foolishly disregarded) by his childhood mentor, the clergyman, Dr. Wilmot, who warned him against "following any rule, but that which is written in the heart, and reproduced and strengthened, for those who read diligently, in every page of the Bible."⁶⁸ Maurice's Wilmot (clearly the shared name was not coincidental) was equally convinced of the Bible's importance, holding that it proclaimed "the law which connected each man with his Creator, and likewise that (dependent upon this primary one) by which he is connected with his fellows."⁶⁹ The same writer's lectures on The Conscience (1868) repudiated the concept of the self as the expression of mere subjective individuality and held up the inner voice that said, "I ought to do this", "I ought not to do that", as the only true self.

Naturally enough, Mill, who had championed the cause of "pagan self-assertion", came into conflict with the "Christian self-denial" represented by Maurice. The Calvinistic doctrines of conformity against which he fought for the rights of personality were exactly those advanced by both Sterling and Maurice. He wrote in On Liberty :

According to [the Calvinists] , the one great offence of man is self-will. All the good of which humanity is capable is comprised in obedience. You have no choice; thus you must do, and no otherwise: 'what-ever is not a duty, is a sin.' . . . To one holding this theory of life, crushing out any of the human faculties, capacities, and susceptibilities, is no

⁶⁸ Arthur Coningsby, i, 245.

⁶⁹ Eustace Conway, iii, 114.

evil: man needs no capacity, but that of surrendering himself to the will of God: and if he uses any of his faculties for any other purpose but to do that supposed will more effectually, he is better without them.⁷⁰

Mill saw that the authoritarianism of his contemporaries was no less imprisoning than the materialism which they attacked, and he opposed to their views his belief in individual uniqueness. Maurice, in The Conscience, found an opportunity to make known his dissent:

I do not doubt with Mr. Mill that diversities, even eccentricities, are much better than the dead level from which all inequalities are removed But I would warn you that the Liberty we have been speaking of today . . . is far remote from eccentricity. [Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius] did not care to be different in their ways from other men; they would rather be like their fellows.⁷¹

Over-cultivation of identity presented a threat to the acceptance of general moral standards, and must be discouraged. Matthew Arnold, though committed to Hellenism rather than the prevailing Hebraic rigidity of his time, was no less certain than Maurice that the particular must be subordinated to the universal. Culture and Anarchy (1869) was clearly written partly for the purpose of correcting Mill's views. Both men concentrated upon the idea of self-development, and both claimed support in the work of the Prussian educationalist, Wilhelm von Humboldt, but whereas Mill was concerned with the individual, Arnold was intent upon the perfecting of the entire human race, and one of the major obstacles in his path was the traditional regard which the Englishman, like Mill, had for free expression of personality:

⁷⁰ On Liberty (1946 ed.), pp. 54 - 5.

⁷¹ The Conscience (1868), pp. 140 - 1.

The idea of perfection as a general expansion of the human family is at variance with our strong individualism, our hatred of all limits to the unrestrained swing of the individual's personality, our maxim of "every man for himself."⁷²

To counteract the enthusiasm of his countrymen for "personal liberty", Arnold saw the need for some "powerful authority".⁷³

This check upon the atomistic tendencies of society's separate members he found in the State or "collective nation", against which, at least in its present form, Mill was fighting. Both Maurice and Arnold, from their different viewpoints, held that unrestrained cultivation of selfhood must bring about the collapse of discipline, order and faith, and therefore that whatever was peculiar to the individual must be, if not totally erased, then subjected to the control of an external power.

Nowhere was this authoritarian philosophy more extremely presented than in the work of Carlyle, who, in 1840, advised acceptance of the "Necessity" of which, in 1832, he had declared that man was "not the thrall"⁷⁴:

It has ever been held the highest wisdom for a man not merely to submit to Necessity, - Necessity will make him submit, - but to know and believe well that the stern thing which Necessity had ordered was the wisest, the best, the thing wanted there his part . . . was to conform to the Law of the Whole, and in devout silence follow that; not questioning it, obeying it as unquestionable this is yet the only true morality known. A man is right and invincible, virtuous and on the road

⁷² Culture and Anarchy (ed. J. Dover Wilson, Cambridge, 1932; revd. 1935), p.49.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 109.

⁷⁴ See above, p. 26.

towards sure conquest, precisely while he joins himself to the great deep Law of the World, in spite of all superficial laws, temporary appearances, profit-and-loss calculations; he is victorious while he coöperates with that great central Law, not victorious otherwise⁷⁵

Carlyle's definition of Duty was likewise co-operation "with the Decrees of the Author of this World".⁷⁶ Around the universe, as he conceived it, ran an iron band of "law", which could compel man to observe it and crush him if he would not. Freedom lay in choosing not to be crushed. Though Carlyle spoke of "the Author of this World", his conception of the power which ruled human lives was certainly better described by the word "Necessity". Later in the century, John Morley, as a Positivist, accepted the scientific vision of "a cold and self-sustained order in the universe".⁷⁷ Carlyle struggled to keep alive the sense of a deity, but in reality saw the world as guided by similarly vast and impersonal forces against which there was no appeal. Even the hero, as the 1832 "Vanity-Fair" passage quoted in the previous section indicated⁷⁸, had no liberty beyond that of submission and service. He was "chosen" not choosing, and his "force" was not self-generated but "given". His heroism, in fact, was simply single-minded devotion to carrying out the task allotted to him by law, in the face of all difficulties. This Fatalistic acquiescence in an external scheme was intended by Carlyle, not only as a rebuke to the questioning spirit of science, but also as a conscious antithesis to the rebellious individualism of Romanticism, represented by Byron and Shelley.

⁷⁵ On Heroes, pp. 56 - 57.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.63.

⁷⁷ "Byron", Critical Miscellanies (1871), p. 278.

⁷⁸ See above, p. 37.

This widespread belief in the sacrifice of personality to an objective law had important effects upon early Victorian ideas of the rôle of the artist. Carlyle and Ruskin, turning away from Romantic egotism, empiricist self-consciousness and (in the case of Ruskin) from the mannerism of the Dutch genre painters, formulated theories which emphasised the need, in artistic production of any kind, for self-abnegation and loving reverence on the part of the creator towards his material.

Dislike of modern self-examination convinced Carlyle that man, instead of studying himself as an individual, should set up his soul as a mirror to the universe around him. Though the "paradisaic Unconsciousness" of Eden was now an unattainable "poetic dream"⁷⁹, yet the healthiest state of man's soul had still to be defined as one which resembled:

a pure, perpetual, unregarded music; a beam of perfect white light, rendering all things visible, but itself unseen, even because it was of that perfect whiteness, and no irregular obstruction had yet broken it into colours.⁸⁰

Carlyle spoke of the mind in terms of light but it is clear that he thought of it as mirror rather than lamp. Man's function was to give back a clear image of the universe, not to interpret it through his subjective consciousness. In the same way art was ideally the mirror of the external creation, undistorted by any intrusion of the artist's personality. The great poet, painter or musician possessed the "Unconsciousness" which Carlyle so much desired for the world itself :

⁷⁹ "Characteristics", Essays, iii, 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.

if the Debater and Demonstrator, whom we rank as the lowest of true thinkers, knows what he has done, and how he did it, the Artist, whom we rank as the highest, knows not; must speak of Inspiration, and . . . call his work the gift of a divinity.⁸¹

Thus art was an articulation of the breath of God, and the artist merely the passive speaking-trumpet through which it was transmitted. The primary requirement for the artist was an attitude of complete self-effacement before the objective facts of the vision which was vouchsafed him. Only then would his representation bear the stamp of reality, as Carlyle explained in "Biography" (1832) :

One grand, invaluable secret there is . . . which includes all the rest . . . To have an open, loving heart, and what follows from the possession of such. Truly, it has been said, emphatically in these days ought it to be repeated : A loving Heart is the beginning of all Knowledge.⁸²

That final sentence was as much a repudiation of the aspiring pride of the Byronic hero as of the analytical scientific frame of mind. The writer must neither dissect his subject nor seek to gain intellectual mastery over it and so subdue it to his consciousness. Instead he must enter into its being, comprehend it and reproduce it in such a manner that his readers would see it set before them with all the force of reality.

The "open loving heart" commended here was undoubtedly the "clear mirror" referred to in the succeeding essay on "Croker's Edition of Boswell's Life of Johnson", in which the great biography was praised as "a picture by one of Nature's own Artists; the best possible resemblance of a Reality; like the very image thereof in a

⁸¹ Ibid., 5.

⁸² "Biography" (Fraser's Magazine, 1832), Essays, lli, 57.

clear mirror." Carlyle added: "let but the mirror be clear, this is the great point; the picture must and will be genuine."⁸³ If the artist loved his subject and subdued the peculiarities of his own personality in its presentation, he would offer a pure reflection. If, on the contrary, he thought only of expressing his own individuality through his material, his work would offer a distorted picture of reality and would be as worthless as that of the three thousand strong army of modern British authors arraigned by Carlyle in "Biography" :

Nothing but a pitiful Image of their own pitiful Self, with all its vanities, and grudgings, and ravenous hunger of all kinds, hangs forever painted in the retina of these unfortunate persons; so that the starry ALL,,with whatsoever it embraces, does but appear as some expanded magic-lantern shadow of that same Image, - and naturally looks pitiful enough. ⁸⁴

This, as will be seen later ⁸⁵, resembled very closely the same writer's description of Byron and Shelley, who similarly imposed upon the universe their own "ravenous" desires. Confronted by the heroic subjectivism of the Romantic poets on the one hand and by the sceptical self-consciousness of inquiry on the other, Carlyle advocated, as the necessary attributes of the true artist, humility and sympathy. As man must serve the great "Law of the Whole", so the creator's duty was to identify himself with the objective facts of external reality, which he must present to his audience without interference from his own mind.

Ruskin was as emphatic as Carlyle about the human purpose in

⁸³ Essays, iii, 75.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁸⁵ See below, p. 65.

this world. "Man's use and function", he wrote in 1846, "are to be the witness of the glory of God, and to advance that glory by his reasonable obedience and resultant happiness."⁸⁶ Art, in his view, was an expression of this authoritarian obligation, and therefore he laid stress in Modern Painters (1843 - 60) on the beauties of God's creation which it was the artist's duty to represent. The effect of a great painting - he was thinking of landscape in particular - should be to make the spectator "depart with the praise of God in his heart."⁸⁷ In view of this religious outlook, it was not surprising that Ruskin, like Carlyle, should stress the part which love and self-abnegation must play in the artist's treatment of his subject-matter. A spirit of sympathy and humility was indispensable in art's great task of discovering the divinity which lay in even the darkest places of the soul :

No intellectual operation is here of any avail
 Here . . . the perception is altogether moral, and
 instinctive love and clinging to the lines of light.
 Nothing but love can read the letters, nothing but
 sympathy catch the sound; there is no pure passion
 that can be understood or painted except by pureness
 of heart; the foul or blunt feeling will see itself
 in everything, and set down blasphemies; it will see
 Baalzebub in the casting out of devils; it will find
 its God of flies in every alabaster box of precious
 ointment. The indignation of zeal toward God it will
 take for anger against man; faith and veneration it
 will miss, as not comprehending; charity it will turn
 into lust; compassion into pride; every virtue it

⁸⁶ Modern Painters, ii (1846), Library Edition of Works (ed. E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 1903 - 12), iv, 28 - 9.

⁸⁷ Preface to 2nd ed. (1844) of Modern Painters, i (1843), Works, iii, 22.

will go over against, like Shimei, casting dust. But the right Christian mind will, in like manner, find its own image wherever it exists; it will seek for what it loves, and draw it out of all dens and caves, and it will believe in its being, often when it cannot see it, and always turn away its eyes from beholding vanity; and so it will lie lovingly over all the faults and rough places of the human heart....⁸⁸

In this passage the self-absorbed artist resembled more the empiricist than the Romantic poet, since he was credited with that disposition to motive-seeking which characterised Benthamism. The "foul or blunt feeling" which saw itself mirrored in all it looked upon, could not help tracing all virtuous actions to the same poisoned source from which its own morbidity flowed. Ruskin did not suspect that a "Christian mind", looking for "its own image", might likewise find it where it had never existed, and so degenerate into sentimentality. The loving heart was credited with a total lack of bias. It saw all things exactly as they were, and like the imagination, with which it was allied, "no fairness of form, no majesty of seeming"⁸⁹ would deceive it into mistaking surface graces for true beauty of soul. Its clear eyes would instantly detect concealed ugliness, while its ready sympathy would find out even the smallest remnants of goodness that lingered in the sinful heart and would cover "faults" with a snow-like mantle of forgiveness. This conception of art was markedly close to the interest shown by Kingsley and Dickens in revealing the humanity which dwelt "in alleys and by-ways"⁹⁰ (the urban equivalent of Ruskin's "dens and caves"), and in demonstrating the spirit's capacity for survival in a world of

⁸⁸ Modern Painters, ii, Works, iv, 190 - 1.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 285.

⁹⁰ See above, p. 32.

hostile conditions. Dickens's claim, at the banquet given in his honour at Edinburgh in 1841, that he had always endeavoured "to find in evil things, that soul of goodness which the Creator has put in them"⁹¹, sprang from the same artistic ideals that were upheld by Ruskin. For these early Victorians, the love of the artist for his material was a moral force, calling into life the inherent beauty of the persons or objects upon which it was expended.

Thus it was impossible for an English novelist to take up the position with respect to his characters which Hippolyte Taine had in mind when he wrote: "[Balzac] aime sa Valérie"⁹². The French writer could "love" his vicious courtesan with the disinterested passion of the artist for human nature in all its variety. Feeling under no compulsion to use such a woman as a peg on which to hang a moral statement, he could allow her full scope to act out her personality to its utmost limit. He would allow no external demands to divert him from the inner logic of his creative vision, but would remain true to the manner in which the figures he had envisaged would naturally respond to the situation in which they were placed. Valérie Marneffe was loved in a fashion totally different from that of Dickens when he displayed charity to Nancy, Alice Marwood in Dombey and Little Em'ly. The English author could not sympathise with a "fallen woman" in any way, unless he was first assured that her heart retained some remembrance of its "god-created" nature. The English mind of the early and mid-Victorian period, unlike the

⁹¹ Speeches (ed. Fielding), p. 9.

⁹² "William Thackeray", Revue des Deux Mondes, 1 January 1857, 2^{de} période, vii, 190; rptd Histoire de la Littérature anglaise (Paris, 1863 - 64), translated by H. Van Laun, History of English Literature (2 vols., 1871), ii, 392.

Continental mind of the same era, did not recognise that the artist might conceive a deep interest in the facts of his story for their own sake and not for that of a moral purpose to which they might be made to conform.

Both Ruskin and Taine, as a result of their very different understanding of the word "love", believed that the artist must efface himself entirely from the consciousness of his public. The French critic objected to the constant introduction into English fiction of authorial reflections on the morality of the personages' behaviour. This interfered with the freedom and autonomy of character.⁹³ Ruskin was more concerned that the intrusion of the artist would distract attention from the glories of the universe, on which all his efforts should be concentrated, and from the moral authority which Taine decried. The first example of such self-centredness which he attacked was the mannerism of the Dutch school of painting, in which, he thought, the primary aim of the artists had been to display, by their skilful imitations of minute details from everyday life, the marvellous nature of their own powers:

It is not, therefore, detail sought for its own sake, not the calculable bricks of the Dutch house-painters, nor the numbered hairs and mapped wrinkles of Denner, which constitute great art . . . but it is detail referred to a great end, sought for the sake of the inestimable beauty which exists in the slightest and least of God's works⁹⁴

Instead of intruding the cleverness of his manner on the audience, the artist must make them see the splendours of his matter :

⁹³ See, e.g., Revue, 169 - 70, 188 - 93; History, 371 - 2, 390 - 5.

⁹⁴ 1844 Preface to Modern Painters, 1, Works, iii, 32.

The artist has done nothing till he has concealed himself; the art is imperfect which is visible In the reading of a great poem, in the hearing of a noble oration, it is the subject of the writer, and not his skill, his passion, not his power, on which our minds are fixed. We see as he sees, but we see not him. ⁹⁵

This last sentence meant not that the artist imposed his subjective vision of the world upon his public, but that he ^usucceeded in making them see the higher objective beauty (corresponding to the "Law of the Whole") to which their less inspired eyes were closed. He brought out the inner meaning of the world around them.

Wordsworth was the modern poet whose superior insights into the divine creation Ruskin most often quoted, and it was Wordsworth who supplied him with the lines, prefixed to Modern Painters, rebuking self-consciousness in the shape of "Philosophers, who . . . prize / This soul and the transcendent universe, / No more than as a mirror that reflects / To proud Self-love her own intelligence."⁹⁶ He thus enlisted the Romantic poet on his side not only against the Dutch mannerists, but also against the German transcendentalists whom he condemned in the third volume (1856) for falling into the grave error of supposing that external objects depended upon the mind of man for their existence and that the universe was a mirror to the soul rather than vice-versa. All objects, these metaphysicians had decided, possessed two sets of qualities, one objective, the other subjective and deriving from man's perception of them :

From these ingenious views the step is very easy to a farther opinion, that it does not much matter what

⁹⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁶ Excursion, iv. 987 - 92, Poetical Works (ed. de Selincourt and Darbishire, Oxford, 1940 - 49), v, 140.

things are in themselves, but only what they are to us; and that the only real truth of them is their appearance to, or effect upon, us. From which position, with a hearty desire for mystification, and much egotism, selfishness, shallowness, and impertinence, a philosopher may easily go so far as to believe, and say, that everything in the world depends upon his seeing or thinking of it, and that nothing, therefore, exists, but what he sees or thinks of.⁹⁷

Ruskin rejected this notion as presumptuous, claiming that things did have, after all, their own reality, irrespective of the observer.

In art, the equivalent of this German idealism was the pathetic fallacy, the interpretation of nature by the light of whatever mood happened to hold the artist in its grip at the moment of perception. Such distortions of external phenomena constituted an intrusion of the artist's subjective consciousness between reality and audience.⁹⁸ Even Wordsworth was not free from the crime of casting the world in his own image: "He has also a vague notion that nature would not be able to get on well without Wordsworth; and finds a considerable part of his pleasure in looking at himself as well as at her."⁹⁹ The earlier Romantic was thus guilty, in Ruskin's eyes, of much the same sin as Shelley according to Maurice or as the Byronic hero, that of imposing his own mind upon the world outside himself. Walter Scott, on the contrary, whom Ruskin thought to be the greatest man of the age, had been "entirely humble and unselfish" in his appreciation of nature: "as Nature is bright, serene, or gloomy, Scott takes her temper, and paints her as she is, nothing of himself being ever

⁹⁷ Modern Painters, iii (1856), Works, v, 202.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 205.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 343.

intruded."¹⁰⁰ Nor did he have that desire to point out his own skills which characterised the Dutch painters, a virtue which he shared with Turner: "Connected with this general humility, is the total absence of affectation in these men, - that is to say, of any assumption of manner or behaviour in their work, in order to attract attention." These two great men neither lavished more care on their "manner" than their matter, nor sought to make their own emotions into a universal law. They were the servants of a power higher than their own: "They do their work, feeling that they cannot well help it."¹⁰¹

This latter statement reflected Ruskin's belief - arising from his faith in the subservience of the artist to his material and of man to God - in the essentially passive nature of the creative process:

All the great men see what they paint before they paint it, - see it in a perfectly passive manner . . . whether in their mind's eye, or in bodily fact, does not matter . . . they not daring, under the might of its presence, to alter one jot or tittle of it¹⁰²

The visions of the artist - which were not subjective, but glimpses of a higher reality - passed before his eyes with all the clearness of actual life. Of his own part in producing them he was totally unconscious: "The great men never know how or why they do things "¹⁰³. Like Carlyle, Ruskin made use of a mirror image to illustrate his point, declaring that the great artist became, under the force of divine possession, "a mere witness and mirror of truth, and a scribe

100

Ibid., 342 - 3.

101

Ibid., 332.

102

Ibid., 114.

103

Ibid., 119.

of visions".¹⁰⁴ Exactly as Carlyle had been led into praise of unconsciousness by his fear of scientific self-analysis and Romantic egocentricity, so Ruskin hymned the same characteristic in a reaction against sceptical motive-hunting, Dutch mannerism and German idealism. The artist became, for both men, a prophet, whose work was not a subjective account of the world as it appeared to him but a spontaneous expression of divine inspiration and of universal truths endowed with the value of absolutes.

John Sterling was able to take a more flexible view than either Ruskin or Carlyle of the relationship between the objective and subjective worlds. He agreed that the mind which was perpetually looking at itself was an unhealthy one, but defended introspection when it was employed as a means of attaining, through self-knowledge, a more complete understanding of universal human nature. A man's being was "the exemplar, and the only one that he can primarily study, of the being of all other men." But Sterling was careful to draw a distinction between the consciousness, which comprehended mankind in general by knowing itself, and individuality, which was purely local and particular:

My consciousness is the window, the only possible one, through which I look at the universe. My individuality is the looking-glass - always a small, often a cracked and dim one, that hangs on the inner wall of the same chamber.

Man had three alternatives: not to open his eyes, which was the proceeding of the majority; to look through the window at the world beyond, "as the greatest and best of men have always done"; or, in the company of "coxcombs or quacks" to see only "as much of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 125.

prospect as is reflected in the mirror". This latter contemplation of "the particular monad, self, for its own sake" divided man from his fellows, but "self-interpretation", when the soul was regarded as analogous to all other created souls, was "indispensable to all true knowledge of man and men". In this second and more valuable activity the self was "dis-individualized, unisolated, rather universalized and idealized". Carlyle's error, Sterling thought, had been to confuse the two varieties of self-consciousness, and so to condemn both indiscriminately.

He had also committed the secondary mistake of supposing that creative men were not aware "of their own particular characters and powers", that is, of their individuality. During "the clear discernment of the microcosmical self" or consciousness all "thought of the atomic self" or individuality would certainly be lost, but :

the light which has been thus gained and spread over the universe illuminates also the twig and cobweb nearest us. The sunrise which enables me to see the wide landscape through the window, no less permits me, when I am weary of meditative enthusiasm, to see my own visage in the mirror, and smile at the wrinkles and the paleness with which I have confronted so fresh and glowing a natural vision.

The "atomic self" thus provided a contrast to the universe; the "microcosmical self" was a reflection of it. Sterling's conclusion seemed to be that the second must draw upon the first:

Accordingly, the fact appears to be that - except in rude primitive ages, when greatness could only be spontaneous, not voluntary, instinctive, not reflective - every great man knows what he is; knows it so well and habitually that he never needs to spend his time in affected sentimental speculations on himself. A few flashing looks into his own story, and the meditated experience of life, give to

such a man a consciousness which he cannot lose if he would, and would not if he could, of all that he is as an individual time-bubble.¹⁰⁵

Sterling, though his "consciousness" was directed to the same end as Carlyle's "Unconsciousness" - the perception of a divine creation - yet admitted the impossibility of looking at the external world with a purely objective eye. Though he maintained that the "atomic self" was forgotten in the moment of creation, he also felt that individuality could never be laid aside completely. Like Carlyle and Ruskin, he looked outwards, but, unlike them, he remained within the chamber of the mind and did not entirely abandon the mirror of self.

The theory of unconsciousness was, however, borne out by the testimony of at least two writers in the first half of the nineteenth century - by Coleridge, whose claim that Kubla Khan was the product of a dream exactly matched Ruskin's description of the artist as "a scribe of visions", and by Dickens, who wrote to Forster in 1841: "some beneficent power shows it all to me and tempts me to be interested, and I don't invent it - really do not - but see it, and write it down."¹⁰⁶ A similar explanation was given by

Thackeray's narrator of the origin of The Newcomes :

Two years ago, walking with my children in some pleasant fields near to Berne, in Switzerland, I strayed from them into a little wood; and, coming out of it presently, told them how the story had been revealed to me somehow, which for three-and-twenty months the reader has been pleased to follow.¹⁰⁷

But if on this occasion Thackeray disclaimed personal responsibility

¹⁰⁵ "Carlyle's Works", Westminster Review, October 1839, xxiii, 39 - 41.

¹⁰⁶ Letters (Pilgrim ed., Oxford, 1965-), ii, 411.

¹⁰⁷ Centenary Biographical ed., xiii, 504.

for his work, he was at other times the very opposite of the ideal artist postulated by Ruskin and Carlyle. Writing novels was, he declared in 1856, "Thinking about one's self"¹⁰⁸. This was a complete negation of the attitudes of his contemporaries.

Thackeray's awareness of his own individuality is perfectly illustrated by the story told of him by Dr. John Brown and Henry Lancaster in their memorial article for the North British Review in 1864:

He was fond of telling how on one occasion, at Paris, he found himself in a great crowded salon; and looking from the one end across the sea of heads . . . he saw at the other end a strange visage, staring at him with an expression of comical woebegoneness. After a little he found that this rueful being was himself in the mirror.¹⁰⁹

He was so self-conscious that he was capable of standing outside himself and treating his own identity as an objective fact. The many self-caricatures among his drawings, especially those showing the characteristically "rueful" round face and spectacles, were witnesses to this. In opposition to Carlyle and Ruskin, he looked at himself in the mirror, and took the weakness of his own personality, which he fairly thoroughly understood, as a representative sample of human nature. "I want to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story - ", he wrote during the composition of Vanity Fair:

we ought all to be with our own and all other stories. Good God don't I see (in that may-be cracked and warped looking-glass in which I am always looking) my own weaknesses wickednesses lusts

¹⁰⁸ Letters, iii, 645.

¹⁰⁹ North British Review, February 1864, xl, 261.

follies shortcomings? in company let us hope
 with better qualities about which we will pre-
 termit discourse You have all of you
 taken my misanthropy to task - I wish I could
 myself: but take the world by a certain standard
 (you know what I mean) and who dares talk of
 having any virtues at all?¹¹⁰

Instead of turning his eyes "away from beholding vanity", as Ruskin advised, and encouraging men to follow a high ideal - the "standard" of which he spoke was Christ - he perversely insisted upon showing his fellows their lower nature. He fully realised the fears of Ruskin and Carlyle that the man who looked at himself too closely would end by imposing his own worst characteristics on the world as a whole. His mirror, being both cynical and subjective, did not possess the purity of a "loving heart". Nor did his art meet the requirements laid down by Sterling. Certainly he employed introspection as an aid to wider knowledge of mankind, but he did so by peering into the "cracked and warped looking-glass" of his individuality (which appeared in the hands of a coxcombed fool on the original title-page of Vanity Fair) rather than through the window of the consciousness. He thus took upon himself the role of those "coxcombs and quacks" attacked by Sterling for their failure to proceed beyond the "cracked and dim" glass which hung in the inner "chamber" of the mind. Rather than seeing in his own weary visage a comical antithesis to the "fresh and glowing . . . natural vision" outside the window, he took it as a typical specimen of the landscape of the external world. The similarity between the imagery which he chose to describe his methods and that used by Sterling seems to argue that he was deliberately recalling the 1839 article in the Westminster

¹¹⁰ Letters, ii, 423 - 4.

Review and was therefore consciously placing himself in antagonism to the artistic and moral creeds of his day. The ugly reflections captured in the mirror of self-analysis, so far from being distortions of human nature, as the early Victorians claimed, were sadly, he suggested, only too true. It was the clear mirror of Ruskin, supposedly presenting objective truths by revealing virtue, that lied. The "vision" which Carlyle, Ruskin and Sterling all sought in art would not come to pass on earth.

Thackeray's emphasis upon the "misanthropy" which resulted from his self-examination would have served to confirm the Victorians in their distrust of all types of subjective or analytical thinking. For both Ruskin and Carlyle a subjective view of life was inevitably a false one. Conversely, a religious outlook was allegedly based upon an apprehension of entirely objective truths. Whatever did not conform with external moral authority or minister to pre-conceived ideas of human duty must spring from a misconception of man's relation to God and therefore from substitution of a personal world-picture for that which existed in reality. Immersion in the self would lead either to cynicism, as in Thackeray's case, or to presumption, as in that of the Romantic poets. Thus the terms "objective" and "subjective" - "two of the most objectionable words", said Ruskin, "that were ever coined by the troublesomeness of metaphysicians"¹¹¹ - held a moral rather than a purely philosophical significance, and to some extent were synonymous with "right" and "wrong".

¹¹¹ Modern Painters, iii, Works, v, 201.

(iii)

An important aspect of late Romantic subjectivism, in early Victorian eyes, had been the stress laid upon the longings of the soul for a level of experience which would transcend that offered by the prosaic and restrictive life of everyday. The aspirations of the individual, finding no scope for their fulfilment in the context of immediate reality, soared away into etherial regions where the panting spirit could find the satisfaction it craved. Byron and Shelley were, for Carlyle, types of the man who, dissatisfied with present conditions, struggled desperately to find a non-existent happiness. "Behold a Byron, in melodious tones, 'cursing his day'", he wrote in "Characteristics": "Hear a Shelley filling the earth with inarticulate wail; like the infinite, inarticulate grief and weeping of forsaken infants."¹¹² In Sartor Resartus (Fraser's Magazine, 1833 - 34), a similar account of Byronic dissatisfaction concluded with a famous injunction :

What if thou wert born and predestined not to be
Happy, but to be Unhappy! Art thou nothing other
than a Vulture, then, that fliest through the
Universe seeking after somewhat to eat; and shriek-
ing dolefully because carrion enough is not given
thee? Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe.¹¹³

The arch-Romantic could not rest content with life as it was, but looked on the world from the isolated viewpoint of subjective discontent, complaining that actuality did not accord with his dreams.

¹¹² Essays, iii, 31.

¹¹³ Sartor Resartus, Bk. II, Ch. ix (Centenary Works, i), 153.

The great German, on the other hand, having outlived the "Wertherism" of his younger days, humbly took up his position among the human race and, instead of sighing for impossibilities, found in the actual the ideal which he sought. His creed was contained in a sentence spoken by the mysterious Abbé in Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795 - 6), which Carlyle presented to the English public in translation in 1824: "The safe plan is, always simply to do the task that lies nearest us"¹¹⁴. This statement was clearly in the mind of John Sterling, when he wrote to his son in 1844 to impress upon him "what a serious matter our Life is . . . what a wretched, insignificant, worthless creature any one comes to be, who does not as soon as possible bend his whole strength . . . to doing whatever task lies first before him."¹¹⁵ The criminal folly of evading one's responsibilities was a theme forever on the lips of the early Victorians.

The Romantic unrest which Carlyle deplored was represented in the late 20's and early 30's by the youthful works of Edward Bulwer. This novelist's heroes lived in a Byronic world of vague and unsatisfied yearning. They were gloomy, introspective and at odds with the world around them. Falkland (1827) was tortured by his illicit passion for a married woman. Pelham (1828), the dandy hero (ridiculed by Carlyle in Sartor¹¹⁶), disguised his keen intelligence under a mask of cold worldly cynicism. Devereux (1829), the eighteenth century aristocrat, was a man of the nineteenth century born

¹¹⁴ Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, Bk. VII, Ch. i (Centenary Works, xiv), 2.

¹¹⁵ Letter quoted by Carlyle, Life of John Sterling, p.259.

¹¹⁶ See Bk. III, Ch. x, pp. 221 - 2.

ahead of his time and never at peace with the age into which he had unfortunately been thrust. Eugene Aram (1832), a murderer for sordid gain, was torn by feelings of guilt and much addicted to flights of impassioned prose soliloquy (parodied by Thackeray in his Catherine of 1839 - 40 and "George de Barnwell" of 1847). Even Ernest Maltravers, the hero both of the novel of that name (1837) and of Alice (1838), whose career was supposed by his author to be a "practical" equivalent to the "theoretical" one depicted in Wilhelm Meister's life of "art"¹¹⁷, appeared for the greater part of his story in the guise of a world-weary wanderer upon the face of the earth, devoid of will or purpose. Each of these five protagonists contained elements of the Byronic hero, suffering inward torments and driven by his daemon into conflict with the universe. They were also seekers of that limitless and unattainable Romantic ideal which obscured "the task that lies nearest". Henry St. John (Lord Bolingbroke) offered in Devereux a perfect summing-up of that sense of imprisonment within the actual which characterised Bulwer's fiction :

Nature places us alone in this inhospitable world, and no heart is cast in a similar mould to that which we bear within us. We pine for sympathy; we make to ourselves a creation of ideal beauties, in which we expect to find it - but the creation has no reality - it is the mind's phantasma which the mind adores - and it is because the phantasma can have no actual being that the mind despairs. Throughout life, from the cradle to the grave, it is no real or living thing which we demand; it is

¹¹⁷ Preface to 1840 ed. of Ernest Maltravers (Knebworth ed.), pp.7 - 8.

the realisation of the idea we have formed within us, and which, as we are not gods, we can never call into existence.¹¹⁸

Bulwer was irresistibly drawn to dramatisations of the discrepancy between men's desires and the external world which thwarted them. Though claiming, no less than Carlyle, to be the disciple of Goethe, he had no capacity for portraying the "here and now" of day to day living, and perhaps, in his early novels at least, no real interest in doing so.

The stern tones of Carlyle in Sartor sounded a rebuke to this indulgence of "the mind's phantasma" :

May we not say . . . that the hour of Spiritual Enfranchisement is even this: When your Ideal World, wherein the whole man has been dimly struggling and inexpressibly languishing to work, becomes revealed, and thrown open; and you discover, with amazement enough, like the Lothario in Wilhelm Meister, that your "America is here or nowhere"? The Situation that has not its Duty, its Ideal, was never yet occupied by man. Yes here, in this poor, miserable, hampered, despicable Actual, wherein thou even now standest, here or nowhere is they Ideal: work it out therefrom; and working, believe, live, be free. Fool! the Ideal is in thyself¹¹⁹

While Bulwer strained in pursuit of a distant and shadowy "America", Carlyle called the attention of his fellow-men to the fact that only in the arena of present duty could they hope for true and lasting fulfilment. Each man had a task allotted to him in the universal

¹¹⁸ Devereux (Knebworth edition), p. 124.

¹¹⁹ Sartor Resartus, Bk II, Ch. ix, p. 156.

scheme, and in carrying this out he would discover his true self. The "Ideal" was no subjective dream but an objective fact, a part of "the Law of the Whole" in submission to which the individual would alone realise his full potential. Work and duty were the means by which mankind affirmed its "god-created" origin: "Our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments."¹²⁰ Carlyle refused to recognise any concept of personality which did not define man in terms of his practical obligations within the context of material experience.

As well as being formulated in opposition to the impracticalities of Romanticism, the doctrine of work was also evolved as an antidote to the self-conscious speculations of the anatomist and metaphysician. Carlyle wrote in 1831 :

doubt as we will, man is actually Here; not to ask questions, but to do work: in this time, as in all times, it must be the heaviest evil for him, if his faculty of Action lie dormant, and only that of sceptical Inquiry exert itself.¹²¹

This contrast of action and analysis was echoed in the unheeded advice given to J.A. Froude's hero, Markham Sutherland, in The Nemesis of Faith, by his uncle :

he said . . . I must remember that the real discipline of the mind is action, not speculation; and regular activity alone could keep soul or body from disease. To sit still and think was simply fatal; a morbid sensitiveness crept over the feelings like the nervous tenderness of an unhealthy body, and unless I could rouse myself to exertion, there would be no end

¹²⁰ Ibid., II, vii, 132.

¹²¹ "Characteristics", Essays, iii, 28.

at all to the disorder of which I complained.¹²²

Healthy work was a refuge from the enervating effects of scepticism and doubt. The soul, flying the feelings of unrest produced by speculation, discovered itself by losing itself in outward-directed activity. "Our Saviour did not sit down in this world and muse, but labored and did good", Dickens assured a correspondent in 1850¹²³. None of these writers pointed out that this insistence upon the virtues of work might itself be morbid, since it often sprang not from a steadfast desire to do what was right but from a horror of the revelations which analysis might make. The imagery of "disease" employed by Sutherland's uncle was intended to refer to the effect of speculation upon the speculator. At the same time it threw a light back upon the speaker himself, indicating the extent to which his objections against inquiry stemmed from "the nervous tenderness" of a sensibility upon which the uncertainties of a questioning age jarred with an almost physical pain. The need for action as check to conscious thought was a symptom of restlessness not health, as Thackeray, in a different context to that of speculation, made clear. During his frustrated love-affair with Jane Brookfield in the late 40's he wrote to her: "Passion is but a hypocrite Action febrile continuous action should be the pole star of our desolate being."¹²⁴ He recognised that his own adherence to the Carlylean ethos was the result of a need to escape from unwelcome thoughts and emotional disappointments and that work was itself a fever rather than the cure for one. Dickens too, if he had been as honest in 1850 as he was in 1857 with Wilkie Collins,

¹²² The Nemesis of Faith, p.39.

¹²³ Letters (Nonesuch ed., 1938), ii, 203.

¹²⁴ Letters, iv, 310.

would have acknowledged that his refusal to "sit down" reflected not only his belief in the moral necessity for work but also the fact that when, in unoccupied moments, he stared himself "seedily in the face", his misery was "amazing"¹²⁵. Activity constituted a flight from self-knowledge.

The gospel of work, seemingly a matter of simple manly resolution, was in fact permeated by the restlessness which the post-Romantic era could not avoid. Carlyle adapted Goethe's philosophy to his own hatred of self-consciousness, but inherent in the German's thought was a concept of self-development which Carlyle also inherited and which involved a long and painful process of that self-analysis he was so anxious to discredit. In the eighteenth century, identity was defined in terms of a fixed and pre-existent morality operating within an established social system. Fielding's Tom Jones had no means of fulfilment outside those presented by the narrow circle in which he was born and bred. He was the heir to Allworthy's values as to his estates. The protagonist of Wilhelm Meister, on the other hand, journeyed^{ed} to a destination which was determined from within, by the special needs and capabilities of his own character. He was at liberty, within limitations of circumstance which no man could escape, to seek out the one place in the world which would afford full development to his inward nature. Instead of succeeding his father as head of the family business, as a Tom Jones would have done, he was able to follow his own path out of the commercial atmosphere of his boyhood into the aristocratic climate of Natalie

¹²⁵ Letters (Nonesuch ed.), ii, 873.

and to share with Lothario in "noble" but unspecified work. Before this position could be attained, however, there must be a lengthy process of trial and error. Man must find out, firstly, what his true nature might be, and secondly, how he could best express it in practical action. In Tom Jones, the repeated errors of the hero were simply retarding agents which kept him from his true station, both moral and worldly. In Wilhelm Meister they were necessary steps on the road to certainty and no longer merely obstacles in the way, for only by ascertaining through sad experience and disillusionment what he was not fitted for could Wilhelm discover what he was fitted for and so define his personality. Neither Fielding's novel nor Emma, with their sudden accessions of self-knowledge on the part of the protagonists - "A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart Her own conduct . . . was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before."¹²⁶ - were novels concerned with the process of education, whereas Meister was based upon the belief that character was an organism, perpetually growing rather than leaping from a state of static error into one of equally static truth.

For all his authoritarianism it was this concept of a search for identity that Carlyle incorporated into the career and philosophy of Teufelsdröckh :

To each is given a certain inward Talent, a certain outward Environment of Fortune; to each, by wisest combination of these two, a certain maximum of Capability. But the hardest problem were ever this first: To find by study of yourself, and of the

¹²⁶ Jane Austen, Emma, Vol. III, Ch. xi (1815; ed. James Kinsley, 1971), pp. 369 - 70.

ground you stand on, what your combined inward and outward Capability specially is. For, alas, our young soul is all budding with Capabilities, and we see not yet which is the main and true one. Always too the new man is in a new time, under new conditions; his course can be the fac-simile of no prior one, but is by nature original. And then how seldom will the outward Capability fit the inward: though talented wonderfully enough, we are poor, unfriended, dyspeptical, bashful; nay what is worse than all, we are foolish. Thus, in a whole imbroglio of Capabilities, we go stupidly groping about, to grope which is ours, and often clutch the wrong one: in this mad work must several years of our small term be spent, till the purblind Youth, by practice, acquire notions of distance, and become a seeing Man. Nay, many so spend their whole term, and in ever-new expectation, ever-new disappointment, shift from enterprise to enterprise, and from side to side¹²⁷

The doctrine of work was formulated as a counterbalance to the modern spirit of analysis and introspection, but could not be implemented without a large measure of self-exploration. Carlyle combined fatalism - to each was "given" a certain task, which it was his duty to accomplish - with self-determination. Though the individual could only develop to his full extent in one particular direction, yet the responsibility for ascertaining what that direction might be was entirely his. This quest for fulfilment was imbued with all the restless yearning of Romanticism for an undefined and undefinable goal. Teufelsdröckh, said the narrator of Sartor, "must enact that stern Monodrama, No Object and No Rest". Carlylean man, vexed by "wild passions without solacement" and agitated by "wild faculties without employment"¹²⁸, must strive continually towards the invisible

¹²⁷ Sartor Resartus, Bk. II, Ch. iv, pp. 96 - 7.

¹²⁸ Ibid., II, iv, 98.

consummation of his nature. Isolated on a narrow spit of land, one unique spark of consciousness in the darkness of surrounding Immensities and Eternities, he must always puzzle over his own being and seek to unify it with the great whole, asking himself the questions: "Who am I; what is this ME? . . . Sure enough, I am; and lately was not: but Whence? How? Whereto?"¹²⁹ The certainties of the eighteenth century had passed away, and man, forced into life by the mysterious processes of universal law and thrust into the midst of circumstances which he himself had not created and which seemed to restrict rather than assist him, was involved in a perpetual struggle for selfhood, albeit of a less egotistical and impractical type than that of Romanticism.

Carlyle always emphasised that the end of this search was more important than the search itself - "we require that a man keep his doubts silent, and not babble of them till they in some measure become affirmations or denials"¹³⁰ - but it was always the latter which engrossed his own attention and engaged his imaginative powers. Nothing could be more concerned than his work - "Silence" in "thirty fine volumes", as John Morley called it¹³¹ - with the subject of doubt or the turbulence of the human condition. There was no greater sense of surety in Sartor or Heroes and Hero-Worship than in Manfred and Devereux. "The Byronic hero", said Morley, "went to clasp repose in a frenzy."¹³² The same was true of Teufelsdröckh and of his creator. The early life of the former was intended as an exposure of Byronism, his later belief in the power of work as an assertion of the mature spirit of Goethe, but the restlessness of the one affected the assurance of the other, and

¹²⁹ Ibid., I, viii, 41.

¹³⁰ On Heroes, p. 174.

¹³¹ "Carlyle", Critical Miscellanies (1871), p.195.

¹³² "Byron", ibid., p. 271.

it was the mood of storm and stress which determined the atmosphere of the book. The creed of Carlyle, as Morley recognised, offered not peace but a more masculine form of the Byronic hunger which its propagator claimed to be attacking.¹³³

The accent in Sartor, and in the novels of Maurice and Sterling, fell upon the growth of the hero not upon his final certainty. Teufelsdröckh moved from youthful love for a worthless object into disillusionment and atheism (The Everlasting No) and finally into renewed faith (The Everlasting Yea). Eustace Conway, having fallen successively into the twin pitfalls of empiricism and transcendentalism, came to accept the conventional Christianity of Wilmot and his sister. In Arthur Coningsby, growth was thwarted, but the process of trial and error was the same. Arthur, forsaking his vast political designs (equivalent once again to the limitless aspirations of Romanticism) took refuge in a claustrophobic, guilty and destructive passion for Victoria de Valence. Unable at the end of the novel to re-affirm his Christian belief - embodied in his pious cousin, Isabel Barrington - he was left to roam the earth in Byronic desolation, ending his days in the wilds of America, a geographical image designed to summarise his evasion of "the humble daily duties, which are the business and the consolation of human nature"¹³⁴. Sterling in particular seemed more interested in the depiction of Romantic longing and dissatisfaction, Lothario's "America", than in the duty which he so strenuously urged as man's only salvation, but in each of these three books the adoption of the bildungsroman form stressed the unsettled quality of human nature. Later, the life of Thackeray's Pendennis provided an exact, though less poetic, parallel to that of

¹³³ "Carlyle", p. 216.

¹³⁴ Arthur Coningsby, II, 288.

Teufelsdröckh. Pen rebounded from his generous but misguided love for Emily Fotheringay into the worldly cynicism of his flirtation with Blanche Amory, before returning to his childhood values by marriage with his "sister" Laura. Thackeray's protagonist, though of smaller intellectual stature than those of Carlyle, Sterling and Maurice, reflected the nervous restlessness which underlay moral assurances about the superior claims of action. Duty did not lie immediately to hand, but was hidden in the mists of the future, and attention was focussed instead on the internal vacillations and strivings of the soul.

(iv)

In literary terms the repudiation of Byron for Goethe, of Romantic dreams in favour of "the task that lies nearest", meant a new emphasis on depictions of everyday reality. Mill, comparing the popularity of Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1837 with their far lower standing of thirty years before, attributed the change to:

an insatiable demand for realities . . . of which desire the literary phasis is, a large tolerance for every feeling which is natural and not got-up, for every picture taken from the life and not from other pictures, however it may clash with traditional notions of elegance or congruity.¹³⁵

Belief in the importance of practical duty was inevitably accompanied by an interest in representations of ordinary men and women engaged in the commonplace occupations of daily life. The homely rusticity of a

¹³⁵ "Carlyle's French Revolution", Westminster Review, July 1837, xxvii, 51.

Wordsworth took preference over the soaring flights of a Shelley. Walter Bagehot wrote in 1856 :

[Wordsworth] knew the hills beneath whose shade
'the generations are prepared' :

'Much did he see of men,
Their passions and their feelings: chiefly
those

Essential and eternal in the heart,
That mid the simple forms of rural life
Exist more simple in their elements,
And speak a plainer language.'

Shelley has nothing of this. The essential feelings he hoped to change; the eternal facts he struggled to remove His sphere is the 'unconditioned;' he floats away into an imaginary Elysium . . . beautiful and excellent, of course, but having nothing in common with the absolute laws of the present world. Even in the description of mere nature the difference may be noted. Wordsworth describes the earth as we know it, with all its peculiarities; where there are moors and hills, where the lichen grows, where the slate-rock juts out. Shelley describes the universe He rushes away among the stars His theme is the vast, the infinite, the immeasurable. He is not of our home, nor homely

136

Bagehot, as a practical man, inclined to the side of Wordsworth. Attractive as the infinite grandeur of Shelley might be, it possessed no relevance to real life. The dissatisfied Romantic spirit refused to be limited by the conditions of commonplace existence to which, in reality, men must conform. Flying away into a region of absolute liberty, it lost its hold on the truths of human

136 "Percy Bysshe Shelley", rptd. Literary Studies (ed. R.H. Hutton, 1879), i, 116. The Wordsworth quotation is from Excursion, i. 341 - 7, Poetical Works, v, 20.

experience. To Bagehot, Shelley was an escapist, unable to deal with the solid and familiar subjects which formed the basis for the poetry of Wordsworth. "Ay, Shelley's gran'; always gran'; but Fact is grander", declared Kingsley's Sandy Mackaye, in the same vein¹³⁷.

Among the manifestations, in the 30's and 40's, of this concern with the real and the "homely" were the works of both Dickens and Thackeray. Sketches by Boz (1836) were described by their author as "little pictures of life and manners as they really are"¹³⁸, and were given the subtitle of "Every-day Life and Every-day People", while Oliver Twist attempted to show "the miserable reality" of criminal existence, avoiding the idealisation of thieves and highwaymen carried out by less truthful writers¹³⁹. Dickens's characters, however grotesque or romantic, lived and moved in the streets of London and were assigned a place in the social structure of nineteenth century England. Thackeray too took his material from the recognisable world, concentrating on the lives of the middle and upper classes in a specifically modern setting. His early writings, from The Memoirs of Mr. C.J. Yellowplush (1837) to The Book of Snobs (1846 - 7) and Novels by Eminent Hands (1847), were dedicated to the pursuit of the real and the exposure of shams, whether literary, social or moral. Catherine, like Oliver Twist, was intended to portray criminals as they were in actuality and to discourage the sentimentalisation of roguery by the "Newgate School" of novelists, among whom Thackeray included Dickens (on the strength of Nancy in Oliver) as

¹³⁷ Alton Locke, Ch. viii, Works, iii, 100.

¹³⁸ Preface to 1st Series of Sketches by Boz (1836), from Charles Dickens (ed. Stephen Wall, Penguin Critical Anthologies, 1970), pp. 43 - 4.

¹³⁹ Preface to 3rd ed. (1841) of Oliver Twist, Clarendon ed., p.lxi.

well as Bulwer, with Paul Clifford (1830) and Eugene Aram, and Harrison Ainsworth, with Rookwood (1834) and Jack Sheppard (1839). In 1847, in his parodies of contemporary authors, Novels by Eminent Hands, he returned to the attack on "Newgate" fiction, with "George de Barnwell". The young hero of this tale, who murdered his uncle for money but whose talk was all of the Ideal, the Beautiful and the True, was chiefly intended as a satire on Bulwerism and especially on the poetic criminal, Aram. The story ended with a dismissal of Romantic yearnings, as the chaplain who attended George in the condemned cell drew the appropriate moral from the prisoner's ill-fated career: "the lover of the Ideal and Beautiful . . . must respect the Real likewise."¹⁴⁰ The conditions and values of the external world could not be brushed aside simply to accommodate the desires of young dreamers.

The novel, as Thackeray understood it, was the literary expression of this fact. It depicted man amidst the restricting circumstances of commonplace life, whereas drama, poetry and romance could free him from the prosaic and raise him to levels of infinite heroism and beauty. The art of the novelist, he informed Masson in 1851, after the latter's comparative review of Pendennis and Copperfield, was "to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality", while "in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically"¹⁴¹. Fiction, because of its ability to reproduce in detail the dense textures of day to day living and to place man in relation to background and environment, was the natural vehicle for conveying the 'feel' of reality. In opposition to the simplicity and

¹⁴⁰ Centenary Biographical ed., viii, 17.

¹⁴¹ Letters, ii, 772 - 3.

freedom of romance literature, where extraordinary actions were permitted because extraordinary conditions prevailed, and to the longings of Romanticism, which chafed at the restraining conditions of the actual, the novel upheld Carlyle's conviction that "man is really Here". Dickens, Thackeray felt, could not claim to be a realist: "I quarrel with his Art in many respects: w^h. I don't think represents Nature duly"¹⁴². Like the "Newgate" writers, and their opposites, the "silver-fork school", who romanticised the life of Mayfair high society, Dickens preferred fancy to fact. He was the creator, Thackeray was later reported as saying, of "the most charming extravaganza in the world"¹⁴³. He dealt in "brisk, dashing, startling caricature", inspiring not belief but "mirth and wonder" and appealing, added Thackeray in his 1847 notice of The Battle of Life (1846) for Fraser's Magazine, "not to your reason and feelings as in a prose narrative, but to your fancy and feelings." He was not a novelist but a "poet"¹⁴⁴, who turned his back upon present reality and wandered away, entertainingly but irresponsibly, into regions of the imagination.

Dickens, who defended his characterisation of Nancy - "IT IS TRUE"¹⁴⁵ - and entered into controversy with G.H. Lewes over the truth to life of Krook's spontaneous combustion, clearly considered himself a realist. Yet he also employed the word "romance" to describe his work. In 1853, he told his readers: "In Bleak House, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things."¹⁴⁶ And his declared intent in Household Words, at its inception in 1850, was: "To show to all, that

¹⁴² Ibid., 772.

¹⁴³ According to his cousin, Richard Bedingfield, Cassell's Magazine, 1870, n. s. ii, 231.

¹⁴⁴ "A Grumble about the Christmas-Books", Fraser's Magazine, January 1847, xxxv, 126.

¹⁴⁵ 1841 Preface to Oliver Twist, Clarendon ed., p. lxxv.

¹⁴⁶ Preface to 1st ed. of Bleak House, from Charles Dickens (ed. Wall), p. 95.

in all familiar things, even in those which are repellant on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out"¹⁴⁷. These statements, however, were not disclaimers of fidelity to life, but the very reverse. They were in keeping with his often-reiterated aim of seeking out whatever beauty and goodness lay in the hearts of the poor and outcast. In his delineation of humble poverty, often embodied in a happy domestic circle - the Nubbles family in The Old Curiosity Shop (1840 - 41), the Peerybingles in The Cricket on the Hearth (1845), the Cratchits in A Christmas Carol (1843) - as much as in his detection of goodness in fallen women like Nancy, Alice Marwood, and Martha in Copperfield, he sought out integrity, love and piety in the lowest areas of city life. He re-created amidst the dingy streets of London the innocent joys of Paradise and the penitence of Mary Magdalene. It was in this revelation of the poetry of "familiar" life that he thought of himself as a writer of "romance", and he would have argued that this did not constitute a departure from immediate experience but rather a perception of its deeper realities, which remained invisible to those who looked only at its surface.

This tendency to dignify the human situation by raising it to the level of poetry, and particularly of religious poetry, was not peculiar to Dickens. By imbuing the commonplace with a semi-mystical significance, the hardships of duty were transfigured. The enactment of the allotted task always placed a heavy burden on the individual, and when it took the form of toil (whether manual or clerical) for one's daily bread it was dreary and potentially destructive of both body and soul. Dickens's elevation of the decent working poor was one tribute to the dignity of honest labour, emphasising the presence in the lowliest hovel of the Christian spirit. The use by other early

¹⁴⁷ "A Preliminary Word", Household Words, 30 March 1850, i, 1.

Victorians of epic imagery, drawn from traditional ideas of Christian warfare against the powers of darkness, was another manifestation of this attempt to surround "the task that lies nearest" with the light of a higher world. Man had to be convinced that by carrying out his duty, no matter how stern the demand it made upon him nor how great the sacrifices he must make, he was assisting in the great eternal battle of God against Satan. Maurice's Wilmot, for example, told Eustace Conway that:

Our life has two divisions - during the first we are occupied in girding on our armour, during the second in using it. Remember, the strife must continue till your death, and that from first to last it is a strife against principalities and powers.¹⁴⁸

Ruskin, in distinctly Carlylean phraseology, gave a similar view in 1856. The world, he said, was no dream or play-actor's stage, but:

a place of true, marvellous, inextricable sorrow and power; a question-chamber of trial by rack and fire, irrevocable decision recording continually; and no sleep, nor folding of hands, among the demon-questioners; none among the angel-watchers, none among the men who stand or fall beside those hosts of God.¹⁴⁹

The arena of common life, so far from being prosaic, was, for Ruskin and Maurice, a battleground between good and evil. In each man's breast God and the Devil fought for possession of the immortal soul. Ordinary existence was transformed into a re-enactment of Paradise Lost or Paradise Regained, as Sandy Mackaye made clear to Alton Locke, after their visit to the squalid garret of the dying Ellen and of her friend Lizzie, who had become a prostitute in order to support her sick friend:

¹⁴⁸ Eustace Conway, iii, 287.

¹⁴⁹ Modern Painters, iii, Works, v, 412.

Poetic element?....That puir lassie, dying on the bare boards, and seeing her Saviour in her dreams, is there na poetry there, callant? . . . That ither, prostituting hersel to buy food for her freen - is there na poetry there? - tragedy -

With hues as when some mighty painter dips

His pen in dyes of earthquake and eclipse.

Ay, Shelley's gran'; always gran'; but Fact is grander - God and Satan are grander. All around ye, in every gin-shop and costermonger's cellar, are God and Satan at death grips; every garret is a haill Paradise Lost or Paradise Regained¹⁵⁰

Disease and squalor were here made interesting, not for their own sakes, but in order to demonstrate the heroic qualities which they called forth. Fact was grander than Shelley only when it could be ennobled into religious epic. The modern Miltonic poem which Mackaye created out of the lives of the poor was another assertion of the power which the human spirit had of rising above adverse circumstances, for it was Paradise Regained rather than Lost that was shown in the characters of the two girls. This descent into the depths had little to do with realism as practiced by Thackeray, for its purpose was to bring up light and to see human existence in terms of literary modes older than the novel.

The poetic qualities which both Dickens and Kingsley descried in humble life owed much to Christianity. But both writers were also touched, consciously or unconsciously¹⁵¹, by the spirit of Wordsworth. Bagehot, in the passage quoted earlier from his essay on Shelley, introduced some lines from Wordsworth's work which spoke of the "[e]ssential and eternal" feelings which "mid the simple form of rural life" could be seen more clearly than would be possible in a

¹⁵⁰ Alton Locke, Works, iii, 100. The Shelley quotation is a misremembrance of The Revolt of Islam, V. xxiii. 8 - 9.

¹⁵¹ Forster testified that "Dickens had little love for Wordsworth", Life, p. 421.

state of greater sophistication. The poetry of Wordsworth, in fact, for all the apparent realism of much of its subject matter, simplified man by removing him from the complexities and refinements of civilisation and showing him, stripped of all factitious adornment, in a state of nature. The Old Leech-Gatherer, stranded in the midst of desolation like a huge rock, became, in his solitude, a type of resolution and independence, while the aged Michael assumed the dignity of an Old Testament patriarch. Wordsworth was concerned, not with the details of commonplace existence, but with the qualities of granite-like endurance which were brought out by life at its most basic. He was an artist who sought, in a grander manner than either Dickens or Kingsley, the romance of reality. Drawing on material of the lowest order, he threw a light into places hitherto unilluminated and discovered there the "elements" of human nature, those qualities which were common to men through the ages and were independent of a man's individuality and of his place in time and space. These shared characteristics were for Wordsworth, as for the Victorians, most often the ones which stressed the potential nobility and piety of mankind. Even so apparently debased a figure as the Old Cumberland Beggar was linked to the essential principle of good which animated the universe:

'Tis Nature's law
That none, the meanest of created things,
Of forms created the most vile and brute,
The dullest or most noxious, should exist
Divorced from good - a spirit and pulse of good,
A life and soul, to every mode of being
Inseparably linked.¹⁵²

This ability to perceive good in evil placed Wordsworth in opposition to the motive-hunting Benthamites (who found evil in seeming good) and

¹⁵² The Old Cumberland Beggar (1797, pubd. 1800), lines 73 - 9,
Poetical Works, iv, 236.

anticipated the claim of Dickens to have revealed "in evil things, that soul of goodness which the Creator has put in them"¹⁵³. For both the poet and the novelist the depiction of low life was bound up with their belief that the accidental nature imposed upon man by society was quite distinct from the essential nature which united him to other men and to God. Humble people were poetic because in them essence was not disguised by the appurtenances and trappings of society, which for the "snobs" of Thackeray constituted the only reality.

Wordsworth's closest associate, Coleridge, recorded that the aim of his friend's contributions to Lyrical Ballads had been to open other men's eyes to the poetry of the prosaic :

to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us . . . for which . . . we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.¹⁵⁴

This insight into ordinary life, Coleridge recalled, had been the major charm of Wordsworth's early verse, which showed "the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dewdrops."¹⁵⁵ Unlike Byron and Bulwer, he had

¹⁵³ See above, p. 54.

¹⁵⁴ Ch. xiv of Biographia Literaria (1817; ed. J. Shawcross, Oxford, 1907), ii, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Ch. iv of Biog. Lit., i, 59.

sought the ideal in the actual, endeavouring, as John Morley was later to say, "to shape a paradise from the 'simple produce of the common day' "¹⁵⁶. Kingsley, who placed Wordsworth, together with Burns and Crabbe, at the very beginning of the "democratic" tradition in modern art, as one of those who had revealed "the poetry which lies in common things" and thus destroyed the old aristocratic exclusiveness of literature¹⁵⁷, was certainly aware of the continuity between himself and the Romantic poet. The new light in which the earlier writer had placed the homely objects and persons of rustic life was used by Kingsley and Dickens to illuminate the lower levels of city society, eliciting their inner meaning and moral significance, and forcing the reader to view them with freshly opened eyes.

This poeticising of commonplace experience, arising out of the need to dignify man's struggle against the harsh conditions of daily life, clearly militated against an entirely realistic treatment of the contemporary world. Implicit in such phrases as "the romantic side of familiar things" and the "soul of goodness" was an optimistic interpretation of life, based on faith in the survival of beauty and virtue amidst unfavourable circumstances. The true artist was he who showed the kinship of immediate reality with that higher but no less objective world, "the ideal world" of Coleridge, to whose glories it provided a mirror. Carlyle thought that the greatest function of art was to disclose the spirituality inherent in all physical bodies :

¹⁵⁶ "Wordsworth", Studies in Literature (1891), p. 35. The Wordsworth quotation is from the Preface to the 1814 Excursion, line 55,

Poetical Works, v, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Alton Locke, Ch. ix, p. 105.

is it not reckoned still a merit, proof of what we call a 'poetic nature', that we recognise how every object has a divine beauty in it; how every object still verily is 'a window through which we may look into Infinitude itself'? He that can discern the loveliness of things, we call him Poet, Painter, Man of genius. . . . ¹⁵⁸

Similarly, Ruskin believed that art was "the pure mirror that can show the seraph standing by the human body - standing as signal to the heavenly land"¹⁵⁹. Incarnate in the material was the celestial, which it was the artist's duty to exhibit. Both Ruskin and Carlyle were thus committed to the religious interpretation of art. Poetry, said Carlyle, should :

body forth some glimpse of that unspeakable Beauty, which in its highest clearness is Religion, is the inspiration of a Prophet, yet in one or the other degree must inspire every true Singer, were his theme never so humble. ¹⁶⁰

G.H. Lewes was another who equated poetry with religion :

the end of both must ever be one and the same. The end of religion, universally considered, is, not its speculative belief, but its practical result; the translation of that hieroglyphic alphabet of faith into its corresponding symbols of action, thus leading mankind to a higher, purer state of being than the uneducated instincts and unrestrained passions ever could attain. Such is also the end of poetry, pursuing that end however through the Beautiful. ¹⁶¹

Beauty was, in Lewes's opinion, the poetic expression of practical

¹⁵⁸ On Heroes, p.10.

¹⁵⁹ Modern Painters, ii, Works, iv, 206.

¹⁶⁰ "On History" (Fraser's Magazine, 1830), Essays, ii, 94.

¹⁶¹ "Hegel's Aesthetics", British and Foreign Review, 1842, xiii, 20.

morality, placing before the beholder that ideal state towards which he ought always to be striving. The artist, most Victorians considered, could exert an ennobling influence over men by presenting for their emulation sublime images of human perfection or of the struggle for that perfection. Lewes's emphasis upon "the Beautiful" differed from Bulwer's in its supposed objectivity. The "ideal world" towards which mankind was exhorted to look did not emanate from the subjective consciousness, but was firmly grounded upon accepted morality. The divinity which was depicted by the poet actually existed, at least in potential, in the heart of every human being.

Inevitably this didactic approach to art determined the choice of subject-matter and its organisation. Ruskin, desiring to place painting in the service of God, had very clear ideas about the nature of the truths which could properly be included in a picture. Scenes of "human misery, slaughter, famine, plague, peril, and crime" were best avoided "as of unprofitable and hardening influence", except in those cases where "out of the suffering, hinted rather than expressed, we may raise into nobler relief the eternal enduring of fortitude and affection, of mercy and self-devotion", or where "the angel of the Lord is to be seen in the chastisement, and his love to be manifested to the despair of men."¹⁶² Physical ugliness too was to be introduced only to set off to advantage the attractions of its opposite: "beauty deprived of its proper foils and adjuncts ceases to be enjoyed as beauty."¹⁶³ The preponderance of beauty over deformity in nature was a sure sign that man was intended by the Deity to be constantly under the influence of the former¹⁶⁴, and the artist who

¹⁶² Modern Painters, ii, 205.

¹⁶³ Ibid., iii, Works, v, 57.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., i, Works, iii, lll.

sought exclusively after the latter, "though he might be able to point to something in nature as the original of every one of his uglinesses, would yet be, in the strict sense of the word, false, - false to nature, and disobedient to her laws."¹⁶⁵ It is plain from such remarks that Victorian notions of realism were governed by moral considerations. The darker side of life - a substantial portion of the human condition, though not, as modern usage of the word "realism" would often seem to imply, the whole of it - was to be, not excluded, but subordinated to, and defeated by, the forces of light. As in Alton Locke, evil only existed to prove the power of good. Poetic truth was inseparable from a predetermined scale of moral values, to which the artist must conform and which was expected to dictate the shape of his work.

Ruskin, thinking largely in terms of landscape, was certain that the absolute beauty which it was the artist's prime task to represent could be found in the present world. The "noble generic form which indicates the full perfection of the creature in all its functions"¹⁶⁶ was a reality. Since this was so, there was no question of the artist indulging in dreams when he drew a perfect form, and Ruskin was therefore reluctant to call such pictures "ideal", since this word, he felt, carried, in its primary sense, the entirely inappropriate connotation of "imaginary"¹⁶⁷, and could be applied to forms imperfect as well as perfect. Lewes, on the other hand, who had in mind depictions of men and did not believe that complete faultlessness existed in real life, had no hesitation in classifying as "ideal" that art which supplied men with depictions of human

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 155.

¹⁶⁶ Modern Painters, ii, 167.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 166.

greatness. In 1843, he compared Schiller and Goethe :

The one was always animated by the ideal; the other always restrained by the real. Schiller drew divine symbols of humanity Gøthe took individuals out of humanity covered with all their weaknesses and sufferings

Gøthe in his wisdom knew what men were, the best of them, and he had no exalted idea of them; Schiller, in his poetical insight (wiser than knowledge), saw that man was greater than he showed himself, and that an indefinite perfection awaited him - splendide mendax! ¹⁶⁸

The realist must reflect the mixture of good and evil which prevailed in the men and women of ordinary experience, but the idealist, freeing himself from the laws of the material world, was at liberty to create men who were wholly good and great. The difference between the two was plainly that between empiricism ("knowledge") and faith ("insight"). Lewes himself, however, could not claim that perfection was a fact, only a splendid lie, corresponding to some "indefinite" and as yet unborn state of the human race. Art moved away from everyday life to a region of endless spiritual possibilities, located either in heaven or in the future history of mankind.

Because of this insistence on the necessity for portrayals of human beauty, courage and virtue, some Victorians demanded from their literature not the romance of reality but a return to romance itself, to that simple world of pure heroines, brave heroes and black villains, where the restrictive conditions of everyday were in abeyance and only extraordinary circumstances prevailed, so that the characters were allowed full scope for the development of their moral natures.

John Stuart Mill wrote in 1838 :

¹⁶⁸ "Character and Works of Gøthe", British and Foreign Review, 1843, xiv, 127 - 8.

The time was, when it was thought that the best and most appropriate office of fictitious narrative was to awaken high aspirations, by the representation, in interesting circumstances, of characters conformable indeed to human nature, but whose actions and sentiments were of a more generous and loftier order than are ordinarily to be met with by everybody in everyday life. But now-a-days nature and probability are thought to be violated, if there be shown to the reader, in the personages with whom he is called upon to sympathize, characters on a larger scale than himself, or the persons he is accustomed to meet with at a dinner or a quadrille party those old romances, whether of chivalry or of faery . . . if they did not give a true picture of actual life, did not give a false one, since they did not profess to give any, but (what was much better) filled the youthful imagination with pictures of heroic men, and of what are at least as much wanted, heroic women.¹⁶⁹

It was only through personages greater than those to be met with everyday that fiction could hope to carry out its didactic function. To lie splendidly was more efficacious than drably to tell the truth. Thus, in the interests of morality, Mill proposed a return to those older fictional modes which contrasted strongly with the factual nature of modern literature. He too desired an art of the spirit not of empirical realism.

It was by stressing, as both Mill and Lewes did, the elevating moral influence of imaginative fictions that the subjective and escapist possibilities of the "ideal" were avoided by the Victorians. Inherent in idealism was the notion that the artist imitated "ideas" not "things". The Romantic poets had stressed the origin of these ideas in the creative imagination, whereas their neo-Aristotelian

¹⁶⁹ "Letters from Palmyra", Westminster Review, January 1838, xxviii, 468 - 9.

predecessors in the eighteenth century had believed that they were selected from life. In preference to either of these some Victorians chose a Platonic interpretation, holding that the ideal had a real existence on a higher level and that all human activity imperfectly reflected it. It was Carlyle's "unspeakable Beauty", of which man was vouchsafed only "some glimpse" and towards which he must aspire. Thus the ideal became associated with the concept of perfection rather than with the freedom of the mind to create what ideas it would. The idealist did not follow Shelley and Byron into a non-existent world where subjective desires were satisfied in irresponsible fantasy, but rather re-affirmed the duty which was imposed upon man of bringing his own nature into conformity with the moral laws of the universe. Lewes, however, seemed to some extent undecided on this point of subjectivity and objectivity, for he began by declaring that the realist, who attached "almost exclusive attention to things", was an example of the "objective" intellect, and the idealist, who dealt in "ideas", of the "subjective"¹⁷⁰. This implied that idealism was expressive rather than mimetic, but in the distinction he made between Goethe and Schiller this was not the case. There it was supposed that the idealist possessed prophetic "insight" into the future possibilities of mankind. Though not portraying a present reality, he was able to cast his mind forward into the gulf of eternity in order to depict an invisible reality, the would be rather than the was. His creations were imaginative, but nevertheless objective in the sense that they realised in a perfect form generally accepted beliefs about the tasks and capacities of man. They were in no sense representations of the artist's personal world-view, and "subjective" was therefore a misleading term to apply to the manner of their

¹⁷⁰ "Character and Works of G8the", 119.

conception.

Undoubtedly, for all their dutiful pragmatism, the Victorians, living in the post-Romantic era, continued to feel that "hunger" for "the mind's phantasma" with which Carlyle had reproached Byron and Shelley. The realist Thackeray, like Bulwer's St. John, yearned for the "one thing" he could not have - "That one thing everybody hankers after, no doubt"¹⁷¹ - and concluded his most famous novel with the melancholy sighing of unfulfilled desire: "Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" Dickens was likewise haunted by a sense "of one happiness I have missed in life, and one friend and companion I have never made"¹⁷², and Forster recorded of him that he had sought in the world an ideal which it could not provide¹⁷³. This emotional dissatisfaction produced the wanderlust which played so large a part in the lives of both novelists. Continual movement, like work, provided a refuge from their sense of incompleteness. "I should never be at home if I could help"¹⁷⁴, Thackeray was reported as saying in 1857. Dickens's need for escape, stated partly perhaps in jest, was even more extreme: "Restlessness worse and worse. Don't at all know what to do with myself. Wish I had a balloon"¹⁷⁵. Both Thackeray, who pilloried Bulwer in the 30's and 40's, and Dickens, who admired him, shared the mood of his heroes, yearning for union with the "unknown region which spreads beyond this great net . . . that limitless beyond" and feeling trapped within the "perilous snare" of material conditions, "from which we are unable to crawl"¹⁷⁶. The emotional starvation apparent in their relationships with women was

¹⁷¹ Letters, iv, 436.

¹⁷² January 1855, Letters (Nonesuch ed.), ii, 621.

¹⁷³ Life, p. 641.

¹⁷⁴ Letters, iv, 379.

¹⁷⁵ 10 May 1855, Letters (Nonesuch ed.), ii, 660.

¹⁷⁶ Devereux, p. 167.

more than sexual. It was a "hunger" of the soul, which neither the stern duties of life in the world nor the womanly affections of the domestic circle could satisfy. The search for an ideal mate was doomed to failure in the context of immediate reality. Man's missing half, the counterpart to his own soul which his heart created for him in imagination, could only be found in the surrender of his material personality to the absolute, and ultimately therefore in death.

Dickens, visiting Niagara in 1868, wrote: "I seemed to be lifted from the earth and to be looking into Heaven The 'muddy vesture of our clay' falls from us as we look"¹⁷⁷. The religious phraseology of these remarks disguised an essentially Romantic experience, the longing to enter into the soul of the universe and transcend the limits of the body. In Thackeray, this urge towards sublimation was not in evidence, but nonetheless was present, in a subdued form, in his persistent feeling of discontent with present actuality and his "always hankering after something unattainable"¹⁷⁸.

The references made by Dickens and Thackeray to their respective, and not dissimilar, states of mind were intended for friends and relations to read in private, though for an attentive reader the same viewpoints could be seen in their fiction. Publicly, however, the yearnings of the heart had to be kept free from all suspicion of subjective desire and aimless longing. The concept of the "ideal", operating at the level of romance perfection, was the means by which the Victorians legitimised their inability to rest content with the here and now and their gazing in the direction of "America". By asserting the benefits to practical morality of non-realistic literature, as Mill did, they justified the escapist side of their nature,

¹⁷⁷ Letters (Nonesuch ed.), iii, 633.

¹⁷⁸ Letters, ii, 813.

which chafed restlessly at the bonds of everyday routine and required reassuring that somewhere, somehow, man might be set free from the circumstances which confined him in the physical world, and be admitted into a wider and more glorious region. The real and the ideal were not, in one sense, opposed, since many believed, or tried to believe, that the latter, like heaven, had an actual existence or might have at some future time, and that it was a natural culmination of present experience, as heaven was of earth, or contained in it, as Christ was in the flesh. The Christian in particular held perfection to be an objective reality, and would not accept as completely true any work of art which did not include a human figure either possessed of complete virtue or arriving at it by combat with the powers of darkness. The work of the realist must encompass the ideal, and must interpret the phrase "life as it is" in the manner of Bulwer in his 1840 Preface to Ernest Maltravers: "I do not mean by 'life as it is,' the vulgar and the outward life alone, but life in its spiritual and mystic as well as its more visible and fleshly characteristics."¹⁷⁹ It was at this point that the idealist and a realist of the Thackeray school parted company, for the latter, by scrupulous attention to the influence of material conditions on his characters, ran the risk of suggesting that men had no life beyond that imposed upon them by "the vulgar and outward" standards of the society in which their being was cast. The idealist concentrated upon the essential life of man, which for the Victorian meant his moral and spiritual aspects. The realist concentrated upon his accidental nature, the manners which he adopted as a member of the transient and purely local society of his time and country. One was concerned with the universal, the other with particulars. The distinction

¹⁷⁹ Ernest Maltravers (Knebworth ed.), p. 8.

between the two kinds of art was that between determinism, debasing humanity by supposing it subservient to its environment, and belief in man's infinite soul. The discussion of realism and idealism was therefore inseparable from the conflict of empiricism and faith with which this chapter commenced.

From the works of the 30 's, 40's and 50's which have been the subject of this chapter four interrelated areas of difference emerge. Empiricism, especially the motive-hunting of Benthamism, was opposed by faith in the perfectibility of man under God. Subjectivity, represented by German transcendentalism, Romantic egotism and Dutch mannerism, produced a reaction in favour of the objective love, humility and self-forgetfulness championed by Ruskin and Carlyle. The limitless desires of Shelley, Byron and Bulwer for an imaginary ideal were countered by the gospel of work and immediate duty, and in literature by a new interest in subjects drawn from the familiar world of everyday. Finally, the concept of realism was in its turn modified by the quest for the romance of reality, and undermined by a continuing need for the purity of romance itself, which led away from detailed accounts of ordinary men and women into the vague realms of the ideal, where mankind was liberated from the bondage of circumstances in order to allow scope for the unlimited expansion of his moral nature. One idea united these four areas - the perfectibility of man through obedience to the moral laws of the universe. Against this one absolute truth the empiricist and the realist, who denied man's spiritual capacities, the subjectivist, who was either an introverted cynic or a presumptuous upholder of his own individuality

against the objective facts of God's world, and the dreamer, who evaded present responsibilities, all offended. The writers of the 30's and 40's endeavoured to reaffirm the faith which empiricism and Romanticism alike threatened. At the same time, the past could not be buried, and the work and lives of these writers contained strong elements of the doubt, self-consciousness, turbulence and longing which Victorianism sought to suppress.

The ideas discussed in this chapter were in the air at the time of Vanity Fair and Dombey, Pendennis and Copperfield, and had inevitably filtered down to the lower reaches of the Victorian world, where they were taken up by minds both more dogmatic and more confused than those (themselves often naïve and inconsistent) which had originally advanced them. The comparisons made between Dickens and Thackeray, though reviewers apparently did not realise it, grew out of a climate of opinion deriving from the reaction of the early Victorians to the errors with which they charged the Romanticism and empiricism of the preceding decades. The concepts of perfectibility, objectivity, duty and idealistic realism were taken over by critics for whom the tensions within the age - between pessimism and optimism, doubt and faith, immediate reality and escape to a realm of poetic freedom - were by no means so clear as they were for a writer like Carlyle. The average reviewer of fiction in the early and mid-Victorian years (that is, from the 1830's to the 1870's) did not fully comprehend the problems of nineteenth century man - sometimes, perhaps, did not feel their existence at all. Yet he absorbed some of the attitudes of Carlyle and Ruskin - not necessarily from personal reading of their works, but simply as a portion of the intangible "spirit of the age" in all its secondary manifestations, both written and spoken - and proceeded to apply them with unimaginative rigidity to the criticism of fiction, as

dogmas above question. The idea of duty, for instance, given additional strength by religious tradition, was so thoughtfully absorbed by the Victorian consciousness, with complete disregard for the restlessness which accompanied it in Carlyle, that it must have seemed to most men an integral part of their moral nature, its origin lost in the sense of a truth always known and endowed with the potency of an eternal absolute by which all human activity must be judged. Certain values were so widely accepted, in this fashion, as 'good' and 'right' that no examination was ever made of their sanctions. The standards employed in considerations of Dickens and Thackeray were thus of very limited range, and few critics, if any, were possessed of the flexibility to judge a work of art by its own criteria rather than by the strict morality which resulted from too insensitive an interpretation of an early Victorian ethos already containing sufficient strictness in itself. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the fact that while the values of Carlyle, Ruskin and Maurice were not of equal validity throughout the century, either in philosophy or art - John Morley, for example, in the 1870's, considered that the writings of Carlyle had been superseded by the Positivism of Comte - they continued to be invoked by reviewers until the 1890's (and even beyond), so that studies of the two authors, at least at the level of periodical journalism, showed almost no advance between the 1840's and 1900, but instead degenerated into repetition and cliché. This lack of progression clearly indicates the failure of most Victorian criticism, already apparent in its moral stiffness, to achieve more than a superficial response to the intellectual currents of its time and so to transform itself into a powerful instrument for the analysis and comprehension of the first great novelists of the age.

PART TWO
THE CRITICISM

CHAPTER TWO

DICKENS, 1836 - 48 : PURITY AND MANNERISM

By the mid - 1830's the opportunity was ripe for a novelist whose work, grounded on the occurrences of ordinary life, would remind men that in the here and now, not in "America", lay the arena of human activity and duty. It is a far cry from the wild Germanic rhetoric of Carlyle to the drab London streets of Sketches by Boz and the Cockney wit of Sam Weller, but nevertheless it was in the earliest writings of Dickens that critics of fiction discerned the first signs of a new realism. Recalling the original impact of The Pickwick Papers (1836 - 37), the Illustrated London News in 1870 saw in their author the leader of a revolution against Byronism and Bulwer :

He did with the pen what some of the old Dutch painters - Ostade, and Teniers, and Jan Steen - had done with the pencil, revealing not only the picturesque effects, but the interesting moral characteristics, that lie in the commonest and even the basest forms of plebeian life. This was a reaction, about thirty-four years ago, as many of us can well remember, against the high-flown affectation of classic and aristocratic elegance which pervaded the romances of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton. Just when Ernest Maltravers had posed himself in a sublime attitude of transcendental nobility, Mr. Pickwick of Goswell-street, in his gaiters and spectacles, with Sam Weller at his heels, toddled forward and took possession of the stage. The school of refined aesthetic idealism was broken up at once, having originated in the example and poetry of Byron, which had so much influence on the last generation. It has never since

revived in England; for the ablest authors of our day . . . have kept within the realistic lines.¹

The difference between the characters of Dickens and Bulwer was partly one of class. The centre of interest had been transferred from the "aristocratic" top layer of society to the middle and lower. At the same time, the "transcendental" and incorporeal "idealism" of late Romanticism had given way to the actuality of familiar everyday reality, represented by prosaic "Goswell-street". This extension of subject-matter was not, however, entirely realistic. The search for "picturesque effects" and "moral characteristics" in the details of commonplace existence linked Dickens, not only with the Dutch genre painters, but with Wordsworthian faith in the value and dignity of humble experience. Though moving in the direction of greater realism in his choice of characters and settings - in so far as he concerned himself with people and sights which might be encountered in the daily life of London - yet in his interpretation of this material he always attempted to elicit the romance of reality.

However, not all reviewers regarded his work in this favourable light. The realism which this critic praised seemed to others dangerously coarse, and the delineation of "picturesque effects" self-conscious and grotesque. On the one hand, Dickens was apparently in harmony with the tendencies of his age, while on the other he offended against several of its most cherished opinions. The contrasting approaches to his art by readers and reviewers of the 30's and 40's form the subject of this chapter.

¹ "The Late Charles Dickens", Illustrated London News, 18 June 1870, lvi, 639.

(1)

Many of the earliest Dickens critics drew attention to the comparative novelty of this fondness for characters drawn from the lower sectors of society. Abraham Hayward, in the Quarterly Review of 1837, considered him "the first to turn to account the rich and varied stores of wit and humour discoverable amongst the lower classes of the metropolis"². Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, in the same year, believed him to be the first writer since Smollett, with the exception of Washington Irving, to tap the "prodigious fund of character" offered by London³, while Thomas Henry Lister of the Edinburgh Review, in 1838, paid tribute to him as "the truest and most spirited delineator of English life, amongst the middle and lower classes, since the days of Smollett and Fielding."⁴ To the Metropolitan Magazine (of which Captain Marryat was the editor), Dickens, having "opened the inexhaustible mine of the domestic life of the masses", appeared in 1840 as the creator of "a new era in our popular literature"⁵. Only Charles Buller, writing for the Westminster Review in 1837, suggested that Dickens had simply accomplished "on a larger scale, and with far more striking effect, what many before him have laboured to do." The taste for low-life was not peculiar to him, but had "long been gaining ground in our lighter literature" (probably in the work of humourists like Theodore Hook and Pierce Egan). However, even Buller granted the young author an unrivalled knowledge of life

² Quarterly Review, October 1837, lix, 500.

³ Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, 29 April 1837, vi, 109.

⁴ Edinburgh Review, October 1838, lxviii, 76.

⁵ Metropolitan Magazine, June 1840, xxviii, 51.

in the capital. He was "the literary Teniers of the metropolis", who painted "the humours of the lower orders of London with all the exactness and all the comic effect with which his prototype has handed down to us the comic peculiarities . . . of his time."⁶

Clearly, Buller was not prepared to grant Dickens a very high place in the literary pantheon. He was primarily a comedian who extracted humour from the situations and persons of low-bred London.

There was, however, more to the appeal of Dickens's metropolitan scenes than their comedy. Sketches and Pickwick possessed for their original readers the charm of introducing them to events which they could recognise as true to their own experience of life, particularly in London. Much of the joy which the young Ruskin felt in Pickwick stemmed from this sense of familiarity: "Dickens taught us nothing with which we were not familiar, - only painted it perfectly for us. We knew quite as much about coachmen and hostlers as he did."⁷ This feeling that Dickens provided his public with a perfect copy of well-known features from the commonplace world of daily existence was shared by many of his first critics. A reviewer in the National Magazine of 1837, probably Lewes, declared: "One of the peculiar merits of 'Boz' is that of bringing before us things which we have all noticed hundreds of times, yet which we never thought of committing to paper"⁸. Charles Buller held the same opinion: "His excellence appears to lie in describing just what everybody sees every day."⁹ But the interest which these transcriptions from life

⁶ Westminster Review, July 1837, xxvii, 196.

⁷ Praeterita, ii (1886), Works, xxxv, 303.

⁸ National Magazine and Monthly Critic, December 1837, i, 448.

⁹ Westminster Review, 202.

imparted to immediate reality was often perhaps superficial. Parker's London Magazine, looking back in 1845 to the manner in which Dickens had achieved fame by "describing trivial and familiar objects which were daily before our eyes", remarked: "When people first saw them graphically described, they laughed at the faithfulness of the picture, and wondered that they, or somebody else, had never thought of doing the same thing before."¹⁰ This critic appeared to perceive in the reactions of the novelist's contemporaries little more than simple-minded wonder which found entertainment in seeing the surroundings of ordinary life reproduced in the pages of a book. The same judgement may have been implied in the previous year by a critic in the Westminster Review who remarked that "all people like to behold portraits of things and persons familiar to them."¹¹

None of these critics attributed to Dickens any special art or even special powers of observation. All men had seen the objects he described, and might have set their observations down on paper had they realised the interest which such pictures would arouse among the public. R.H. Horne, on the other hand, in his A New Spirit of the Age (1844), saw in Dickens a man set apart from his fellows by extraordinary powers of perception and a unique ability to give to the everyday world an appearance to which other eyes had been blind. His talent was more than mimetic. He could see "so much more in a given space and time than people usually do" and could exhibit "the most trifling and commonplace things in a new and amusing light."¹² Even here the accent was on the entertainment which could be derived from his paintings of the ordinary life around him, but it was at least apparent to Horne that

¹⁰ "Boz Versus Dickens", Parker's London Magazine, February 1845, i, 122.

¹¹ Review of Horne's New Spirit of the Age, Westminster Review, June 1844, xli, 374.

¹² A New Spirit of the Age, i, 52, 56.

he proceeded beyond imitation to illumination of the familiar world.¹³ More serious weight was attached to this aspect of his work by the critic of the Examiner, perhaps Forster, in a notice of Sketches: "He shows his strength in bringing out the meaning and interest of objects which would altogether escape the observation of ordinary minds."¹⁴ In 1846, the same paper commented approvingly on the "power (so peculiar to Mr. Dickens) of presenting the commonest objects with freshness and beauty"¹⁵. The Morning Post found in Sketches "infinite skill in giving importance to the commonplace scenes of everyday occurrence"¹⁶, and even Richard Ford, in the Quarterly Review of 1839, although suspicious of the general trend of Dickens's writings¹⁷, could speak of him in terms which, more poetically expressed, might to some extent have been used of Wordsworth:

He translates nature and life. The identical landscape or occurrence, when reduced on one sheet, will interest and astonish those who had before seen with eyes that saw not, and heard with ears that heard not, on whom previously the general incident had produced no definite effect.¹⁸

Ford might equally well have applied to Dickens the words of Coleridge on Wordsworth, for clearly this description of the novelist's aims indicated that he too had awakened his readers "from the lethargy of custom" by giving "the charm of novelty to things of every day". His pictures of familiar scenes did more than please the public by presenting it with accurate copies of its own experience. They showed it a

¹³ But see also below, p. 129.

¹⁴ Examiner, 28 February 1836, 132.

¹⁵ Examiner, 26 December 1846, 821.

¹⁶ Morning Post, 12 March 1836, 6.

¹⁷ See below, pp. 121 - 3.

¹⁸ Quarterly Review, June 1839, lxiiv, 90 - 1.

world which often it knew at first-hand, and made it suddenly aware that it had never looked at this familiar world with open eyes. The commonplace assumed a new appearance, and was endowed with "freshness", "beauty" and "importance" which before no one had dreamed that it possessed.

This effect of "novelty" was increased by the fact that not all the material of Dickens's novels was known to his readers, as Forster noted in a review of Nicholas Nickleby (1838 - 39):

Thousands read the book because it places them in the midst of scenes and characters with which they are already themselves acquainted; and thousands read it with no less avidity because it introduces them to passages of nature and life of which they before knew nothing, but of the truth of which their own habits and senses suffice to assure them.¹⁹

While Ruskin fell into the first of these two categories, Harriet Martineau exemplified the second, though emphasising more than Forster the strangeness of Dickens's subjects. For her his excursions into the lower areas of urban life plainly led to realms as unfamiliar as those of an Arabian Night, for she wrote in 1849 of "the Boz who rose up in the midst of us like a jin with his magic glass among some eastern people, showing forth what was doing in the regions of darkness, and in odd places where nobody ever thought of going to look."²⁰ The exotic nature of this comparison identified Dickens not as a realist but as a writer intent upon discovering the romantic aspects of common life. He was an explorer in his own native land, bringing back wonderful tales of lost tribes from regions hitherto unmapped. Thomas Hood, reviewing The Old Curiosity Shop for the Athenaeum in 1840, pointed out that:

¹⁹ Examiner, 27 October 1839, 677.

²⁰ A History of the Thirty Year's Peace, 1815 - 46 (1873), iv, 439.

It has been said that one-half of the world does not know how the other half lives; an ignorance, by the way, which Boz has essentially helped to enlighten: it is quite as certain that one-half of London is not aware of even the topographical existence of the other²¹

This deficiency also Dickens set out to remedy, setting his novels in the Borough and Saffron Hill, St. Giles and Bevis Marks, rather than in Mayfair.

The danger of these domestic explorations was exactly the same as that arising from the encounter between European civilisation and African customs. Just as the black man was regarded by the white as both degraded and comical, so the poor could appear to the more fortunate classes as beings of a lower species. This patronising attitude was evident in the work of Richard Ford, who ascribed Dickens's popularity to the "curiosity" excited by the "strange habits" of "her Majesty's lower orders . . . in the higher, their antipodes", and went on to cast offensive aspersions on the humanity of the nation's submerged population :

Life in London, as revealed in the pages of Boz, opens a new world to thousands bred and born in the same city, whose palaces overshadow their cellars - for the one half of mankind lives without knowing how the other half dies: in fact, the regions about Saffron Hill are less known to our great world than the Oxford Tracts; the inhabitants are still less; they are as human, at least to all appearance, as are the Esquimaux or the Russians, and probably (though the Zoological Society will not vouch for it) endowed with souls; but, whether souled or not souled, they are too far beneath the higher classes to endanger any loss of caste or contamination in the inquiry.

²¹ Athenaeum, 7 November 1840, 888.

Secure in their own position, these really
 enjoy Boz²²

Judged by the tenor of the remainder of his article²³, Ford seems to have been perfectly serious in these remarks. His final point at least had some possible justification, since it can be surmised that some members of the well-to-do classes regarded Dickens's low-life scenes purely as an amusement designed for their leisure hours, enabling them to inspect the lower portions of creation from a comfortable distance without fear of compromising their own dignity. So far from uniting the various levels of society, Ford was arguing, the novelist's descent into the depths actively furthered the contempt felt by the rich and cultivated for the denizens of the city slums. Dickens assisted prejudice rather than dispelling it.

Ideally the effect of his work was exactly the opposite of that suggested by Ford. The value of his concern with the middle and lower classes lay in the discovery of a common humanity which joined all men together, regardless of their position in society. J. Hain Friswell, looking back on the early novels from the vantage-point of 1870, believed that Dickens's great achievement had been to break through the snobbery of the 30's, by showing that the lower middle classes were not figures of fun but human beings. For the first time "common-place good people, - tradesmen, clerks, and shopmen" had been treated with sympathy:

and at these . . . Theodore Hook, Lady Blessington, and the silver-fork school, who were in the saddle when Dickens was a young man . . . were in the habit of sneering; their novels were made up almost entirely of abusive descriptions of the "shopocracy," vulgar

²² Quarterly Review, June 1839, lxiv, 87 - 8.

²³ See below, pp. 121 - 3.

people who dropped their H's Charles Dickens never stooped to this he often makes his young men of business his heroes . . . elevates his merchants into an atmosphere of generosity and benevolence, and finds a dozen better things to laugh at than the old worn-out conventional and farcical resort of making a man say, " 'Ow do you do? 'Ave some happles."²⁴

The "silver-fork" novelists, who had invoked the values of Mayfair, regarded tradesmen and clerks, according to Friswell, with the uninvolved amusement which elegant visitors to a zoo might bestow upon the antics of monkeys. Dickens, on the contrary, had shown that the commercial classes were often more dignified specimens of humanity than the ladies and gentlemen who ridiculed them. He had given to the English novel not only new material but a new attitude, his lack of embarrassment at presenting low-life to the public constituting a refreshing change, as Abraham Hayward said in 1837, from the condescension of the fashionable society authors.²⁵

Of more importance than his treatment of the "shopocracy" was his sympathy for the poor, which appealed to the Victorian mind on its practical side by setting in motion its philanthropical impulses. John Morley, writing of the period from the mid-40's onwards, recalled that, in an age when "rationalism and natural science blew defiant bugles against the old tradition", Dickens had helped in the task of social reform by non-intellectual means. He had "kindled by his concrete pictures, not by abstract reason, a new feeling for our fellows, new knowledge of them and their ways, and new anger against the gross and stupid wrongs, social and legal, from which they suffered."²⁶

²⁴ Modern Men of Letters Honestly Criticised (1870), pp. 35 - 6.

²⁵ Quarterly Review, October 1837, lix, 507.

²⁶ Recollections (2 vols., 1917), i, 25 - 6.

In the work of critics in the 30's and 40's it was the "new feeling for our fellows" that was most praised, rather than the "anger" against social oppression. Dickens's novels, it was held, encouraged the more prosperous classes to look on their less favoured brethren with an eye of pity and love, and to aid them by acts of philanthropy. The Edinburgh Review critic, Thomas Henry Lister, wrote in 1838: "The tendency of his writings is to make us practically benevolent - to excite our sympathy in behalf of the aggrieved and suffering in all classes; and especially in those who are most removed from observation."²⁷ The imprisoned debtor (in Pickwick), the orphan pauper and the juvenile criminal (in Oliver) and the pupils of the Yorkshire schools (in Nickleby), were the victims of social neglect whom Lister mentioned as having been brought to public notice for the first time by Dickens. The influence of the novelist's work on "practical" behaviour was also noted by Forster, who regarded A Christmas Carol as a book which would induce in the "well-doing man of town or country . . . thoughts that will make him uneasy till he sends a leg or a wing [of Christmas turkey] to his nearest starving neighbour." All who read it would "learn of Christmas the sacred lesson of its Founder, and do the good they can", while even the worst of men, under "its magic influence", would experience a "sudden amendment of the heart"²⁸. His social philosophy thus had the great recommendation in Victorian eyes of directing attention towards the task that lay immediately to hand, in this case the provision of assistance to the poor. He was no ineffectual dreamer, brooding like Shelley or Arthur Coningsby over vast plans of social reform, but a "plain, practical and manly"²⁹

²⁷ Edinburgh Review, October 1838, lxviii, 77.

²⁸ Examiner, 23 December 1843, 804.

²⁹ Edinburgh Review, 77.

writer, who led his public into "solid, earnest, practical thoughts"³⁰ upon the conditions of the poor. The difference between his outlook and that of Shelley and Byron was hinted at by Lister: "There is no mawkish wailing for ideal distresses - no morbid exaggeration of the evils incident to our lot - no disposition to excite unavailing discontent, or to turn our attention from remediable grievances to those which do not admit a remedy."³¹ Instead of attempting to persuade men that they ought to feel dissatisfaction with their lot, Dickens bent all his energies to discovering the ways in which the position of one section of the community could be improved. He fixed his gaze upon what was "remediable" in the present situation, not upon a shadowy world in which the entire human condition might be utterly transformed. The limitless aspirations of Romanticism were replaced by an interest in tangible accomplishment. This was one aspect of the light which Dickens brought up from the dark and unfamiliar places of the earth.

The other was the reassurance of human dignity to be derived from his sympathetic portraits of the decent poor. For many of his original readers he was associated with a generally optimistic interpretation of life. Mary Russell Mitford referred in 1837 to the "cheerful view, a Shakespearian view, of humanity"³² to be found in Pickwick, and Hood testified in 1840 that: "We invariably rise from the perusal of his volumes in better humour with the world; for he gives us a cheerful view of human nature"³³. This verdict was endorsed by the Dublin University Magazine of 1847: "we have scarcely ever arisen from the perusal of [his works] without entertaining a higher and a better opinion of human nature."³⁴ One of the factors

³⁰ Examiner, 804.

³¹ Loc. cit.

³² Life of Mary Russell Mitford (3 vols., ed. A.G. L'Estrange, 1870), iii, 78.

³³ Athenaeum, 7 November 1840, 888.

³⁴ Dublin University Magazine, January 1847, xxix, 135.

in establishing him as an author who gave a "cheerful" impression of mankind, quite apart from his humour, was his depiction of the self-respect of the working classes, for out of this arose his faith in virtue's capacity for survival in the face of the most unfavourable circumstances. "The poor are his especial clients", claimed Hood : "He delights to show Worth in low places"³⁵. In asserting that goodness was not extinguished by squalor and suffering, and might even exist in a sinful breast, Dickens ministered to the belief in a perfection which could be attained, not only in the depths of society, but by all men. If the lowest creature was capable of adhering to the path of righteousness, the perfectibility of the human race was not after all an illusion.

To Dickens's early critics the theme of "Worth in low places" was an important element in his fiction. The Spectator, thinking of Nancy, said in 1838: "he has a hearty sympathy with humanity, however degraded by vice or disguised by circumstances, and a quick perception to detect the existence of the good, however overlaid"³⁶. The Dublin University Magazine, also reviewing Oliver, commented more guardedly that the novelist "occasionally elicits from the thick darkness of the deepest human baseness and degradation faint sparklings of a better spirit"³⁷. In 1843, James Spedding, in the Edinburgh Review, praised Dickens's "respect for the human soul, and the genuine face and voice of nature, under whatever disadvantages of person, situation, or repute in the world"³⁸, while, a month later, the Westminster Review commended his "sympathy for . . . all that is good,

³⁵ Loc. cit.

³⁶ Spectator, 24 November 1838, xi, 1115.

³⁷ Dublin University Magazine, December 1838, xii, 700.

³⁸ Edinburgh Review, January 1843, lxxvi, 498.

and true, and beautiful in the human heart, though buried in the depths of poverty and covered in a guise too mean to be penetrated by the eyes of superficial observers."³⁹ In 1844, R.H. Horne drew attention, as many critics did, to the manner in which Dickens painted scenes of low-life and vulgarity without ever degenerating into coarseness, and continued:

Nor is the squalid place so bad as it was before he entered it, for some "touch of nature" - of unadulterated pathos - of a crushed human heart uttering a sound from out the darkness and the slough, has left its echo in the air, and half purified it from its malaria of depravity. ⁴⁰

The Examiner's review of The Chimes (1844) echoed this, finding that Dickens threw "light and warmth on the coldest and squalidest places"⁴¹, and when The Battle of Life appeared in 1846 Forster commented on the author's "faculty of detecting the rarest loveliness of life in its homeliest forms"⁴². Implicit in the praise of each of these critics for Dickens's ability to trace beauty and virtue in places where they were least to be expected was a hopeful assertion of the power of the human soul over adverse circumstance. The exhibition of goodness, "unextinguished and unextinguishable", in the obscurity of poverty, was more explicitly connected by William Howitt in the People's Journal of 1846 with the fact that "humanity is paramount to all artificial [class] distinctions" and that "spite of the hardest treatment of fortune, if we maintain our inward worth we never can become contemptible."⁴³ The primary aim of this reviewer was to uphold the working classes against the aristocracy, the democratic

³⁹ Westminster Review, February 1843, xxxix, 146.

⁴⁰ A New Spirit of the Age, i, 13.

⁴¹ Examiner, 21 December 1844, 803.

⁴² Examiner, 26 December 1846, 821.

⁴³ People's Journal, 3 January 1846, i, 11.

novel of Dickens in which everyone was of equal importance against the feudal novel of Scott, in which the hero was always taken from the upper classes⁴⁴, but his remark upon the supremacy of "inward worth" over external conditions could be applied to humanity as a whole. The example of endurance set by the poor was one to be followed by all.

Dickens, it was felt by his admirers, had reiterated an age-old truth which could not be too often repeated - that man was not the puppet of circumstance, but could always affirm his Carlylean "god-created" origin. Even the most degraded being, Nancy for instance, was capable of moral choice, revealing that "soul of goodness in things evil" which such men as Thomas Talfourd⁴⁵, Hood⁴⁶, and "Christopher North" (Professor John Wilson) of Blackwood's⁴⁷, pointed out as a leading characteristic of Dickens's work in the late 30's and early 40's. The divine spark was shown to be proof against all the assaults which hostile fortune could launch against it. The pure life of Little Nell embodied the same lesson, standing for Hood as an emblem of the uncorrupted soul arising triumphantly above the evils of a decayed and fallen world: "How soothing the moral, that Gentleness, Purity, and Truth, sometimes dormant but never dead, have survived, and will outlive, Fraud and Force, though backed by gold and encased in steel!"⁴⁸ And the girl's death was no less, in the mind of Horne,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁵ Letter to Dickens, 1837, quoted in Dickens's Letters (Pilgrim ed.), 1, 685.

⁴⁶ Letter to Dickens, 1840, quoted Dickens. The Critical Heritage (ed. Philip Collins, 1971), p. 95.

⁴⁷ Addressing Dickens at the Edinburgh banquet of 1841, in a speech quoted by the novelist himself in his reply, Speeches, p.9.

⁴⁸ Athenaeum, 7 November 1840, 887.

an occasion of hope. Pointing out the poetic rhythms of Dickens's commentary on her funeral ("Of every tear/That sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves,/ Some good is born, some gentler nature comes"), Horne remarked that these lines were "worthy of the best passages in Wordsworth, and thus, meeting on the common ground of a deeply truthful sentiment, the two most unlike men in the literature of the country are brought into the closest approximation."⁴⁹ His feeling seemed to be that Dickens, having robbed death of its terrors and turned it to good purpose by showing its softening effect on the living, was united to Wordsworth, however "unlike" in other respects, in his perception of good in evil. Other readers also saw resemblances between the poet and the novelist. The presentation of the Peerybingle household in The Cricket on the Hearth was described in Chambers's Edinburgh Journal as "a picture of humble life, contemplated in its poetic aspects, and at its more romantic crises", showing that Dickens, while lacking "the profundity and stern power" of the great poet, was "ambitious of becoming the Wordsworth of prose fiction."⁵⁰ And Kingsley, through Alton Locke, linked together Dickens, Crabbe, Burns, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Hood as "democratic" artists who, by their "revelation of the poetry which lies in common things", had destroyed the notion of literature as the possession of an "exclusive" few.⁵¹ Finding the "soul of goodness in things evil" and the romance that lurked in reality Dickens was, in aim at least if not in execution, the heir of the great Romantic.

⁴⁹ Op. cit., p. 68.

⁵⁰ Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, 17 January 1846, n.s.v., 44.

⁵¹ Alton Locke, Works, iii, 105. See above, p. 36.

There was, therefore, no danger of his committing the error of the empiricists in attributing virtuous actions to diseased causes. His intention was to find good in evil, not evil in good. He was totally devoid of cynicism, either of the Benthamite or the aristocratic Byronic type. His vein, said Richard Ford, was "rich, racy, sparkling, and goodnatured - never savage, sarcastic, malevolent, nor misanthropic"⁵². He employed irony and sarcasm, Horne noted, but these were "never of a morbid misanthropical kind" or "in the shape of tranchant [sic] side hits and stabs at human nature"⁵³. The whole purpose of The Chimes, according to the Economist, was to reprove a social philosophy based on "mistrust of one another . . . mistrust of ourselves, or of human nature and human affections"⁵⁴. Dickens was thus associated with the refutation of all views of life which underestimated man. Forster too may have had this aspect of Dickens's work in mind when he said in 1839: "We are never disgusted by misplaced ridicule." However, Forster was eager to stress that the revelation of the "soul of goodness" was never likely, in his friend's case, to relax into toleration of all men regardless of moral distinctions: "If there is good going on, there is a vivid and hearty style to bring out all its beauty; and if there is evil, it runs no chance of being mistaken for good."⁵⁵ Thomas Lister was equally confident of Dickens's moral integrity: "He never endeavours to mislead our sympathies - to pervert plain notions of right and wrong - to make vice interesting in our eyes - and shake our confidence in those whose conduct is irreproachable, by dwelling on the hollowness of seeming virtue."⁵⁶ The boundary-

⁵² Quarterly Review, June 1839, lxiv, 90.

⁵³ Op. cit., p.45.

⁵⁴ Economist, 18 January 1845, iii, 54.

⁵⁵ Examiner, 27 October 1839, 677.

⁵⁶ Edinburgh Review, October 1838, lxviii, 77 - 8.

line between, on the one side, belief in the survival of goodness in the midst of degradation, and, on the other, the rendering of vice in a sympathetic light, was a very thin one which any artist who wished to succeed in the Victorian era had to be careful he did not cross. Optimism must never take the form of leniency towards the wrong-doer.

Viewed with a friendly eye, such as that of Forster, Dickens thus seemed, in all respects, to constitute a "clear" mirror. His art was, first of all, realistic, in the sense that its subjects were taken from a life that was known to, or at least suspected by, his readers. Accounts of familiar scenes and persons gave a new importance to the everyday world, after the transcendentalism of the Romantics. It was this down-to-earth quality in Dickens's books which was singled out for attention by Forster in the late 1830's. "All of it is real life and human nature"⁵⁷, he declared after reading the Fleet scenes of Pickwick. Two years later, on the completion of Nickleby, he remarked upon the anti-transcendentalism of the novel: "He seizes the eager attention of his readers by the strong power of reality. Our sympathies are never left to wander off, into quarters vague or undefined, from the flesh and blood to which he allies them."⁵⁸ Lacking the "undefined" idealism of Romanticism, Dickens was also free from its egotism. His sole wish was to remain true to nature and to reproduce faithfully the characters and events which she offered. "We are never repelled", wrote Forster in 1839, "by the abominations of egotism"⁵⁹. And, in 1838, there was admiration for his "singular command over the absolute

⁵⁷ Examiner, 2 July 1837, 422.

⁵⁸ Examiner, 27 October 1839, 677.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

realities of life"⁶⁰. By "absolute realities" Forster evidently meant those qualities which existed in a person or thing independently of the mind and mood of any observer. The objective Dickens, he was claiming, never intruded his own consciousness between audience and subject. Like most Victorian critics of both Dickens and Thackeray, Forster made no attempt to set the novel against a background of recent literature or philosophy - references to Fielding and Scott were more normal than to Bentham and Byron - but his standards were plainly those of early Victorianism, already so deeply absorbed by himself and his contemporaries that they needed no further elaboration. Transcendental wanderings and self-consciousness were automatically assumed to be faults, and no explanation was required for their condemnation.

In the 40's, for reasons which will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter, it became necessary for Forster to emphasise the more spiritual aspects of the "absolute realities" he had discerned in the Dickens novels of the 30's. Of Martin Chuzzlewit (1843 - 44) he wrote:

It seems to us that with no abatement of the power which gives out sharp and bold impressions of reality, we have more of the subtler requisites which satisfy imagination and reflection While we witness the transactions of life immediately in hand, we are made conscious of that higher and more permanent life which still hangs and hovers over all.⁶¹

Later, in 1846, discussing The Battle of Life, he praised its "incessant

⁶⁰ Examiner, 23 September 1838, 595.

⁶¹ Examiner, 26 October 1844, 675.

springing upward from every-day realities into regions of imaginative thought"⁶². The mirror of Dickens's art reflected not only present life but that higher reality which religion endowed with all the force of objective fact. The bridge between these two levels of truth, for many of Dickens's readers, was the aura of poetry with which he surrounded human experience, and in particular his capacity, which he shared with the "right Christian mind" of which Ruskin was to write in Modern Painters⁶³, to uncover virtue no matter how dark the den which concealed her or how foul her outer covering. His penetration into the "soul of goodness in things evil" and his search for the romance of reality proved him to possess the "open loving heart" of the Carlylean artist, and the Ruskinian "pure mirror that can show the seraph standing by the body . . . as signal to the heavenly land". His realism of subject-matter was enlisted on the side of intuitive religious optimism, which desired to see in the events of common life glimpses of Paradise.

(ii)

Not all those who drew attention to Dickens's low-life scenes did so in order to praise his Christian sympathy. Several of the reviewers of Sketches, for instance, took exception to the nature of the contents. The critic of the Court Journal, in an appreciative notice, found the humour "real" but "coarse", and added: "The subjects of 'Boz' generally preclude refinement."⁶⁴ The Atlas was more severe: "The difficulty of truly describing city life without

⁶² Examiner, 26 December 1846, 821.

⁶³ See above, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Court Journal, 20 February 1836, 123.

reflecting its vulgarities . . . we admit; but this writer has a gout for them which precludes him from the benefit of the argument of necessity."⁶⁵ The Mirror found that "the incidents savour too strongly of low London life"⁶⁶, and the Monthly Review spoke disparagingly of "the undignified character of his subjects"⁶⁷. This latter periodical was scarcely less fastidious about Pickwick, claiming that it dealt specifically with Cockneyland and contained "only that sort of sly satire which can be understood in the more vulgar fields of that broad region of life and humour."⁶⁸ Because of the nature of his characters, Dickens was often considered to be simply an entertainer of the masses, the leading Cockney comedian of his day. His work would afford little pleasure to the more discerning reader, and could be easily dismissed.

More alarmingly, in Oliver Twist, he chose to focus his attention on those members of the lower classes, the criminals, in whom humanity had been totally abnegated and bestiality had assumed entire sway. The attitude towards this novel of Lord Melbourne, as described by Queen Victoria, was not untypical:

"It's all among Workhouses, and Coffin Makers, and Pickpockets," he said; "I don't like that low debasing style . . . I shouldn't think it would tend to raise morals; I don't like that low debasing view of mankind." We defended Oliver very much, but in vain. "I don't like those things; I wish to avoid them; I don't like them in reality, and therefore I don't wish to see them represented," he continued; that everything

⁶⁵ Atlas, 21 February 1836, xi, 123.

⁶⁶ Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction, 16 April 1836, xxvii, 249.

⁶⁷ Monthly Review, March 1836, n.s. i, 357.

⁶⁸ Monthly Review, February 1837, 153.

one read should be pure and elevating.⁶⁹

The delineation of thieves and paupers constituted for Melbourne a slur on human nature as a whole. It should never be admitted by the artist that there existed a darker side to life, or that man was capable of acts which lowered him to the level of the brutes. The purpose of art was to remind men of their higher nature. With this view other critics were in agreement. The Monthly Review, though it allowed Dickens "high and pure aims" and admitted that he had painted the character of Nancy with delicacy, still felt that he "revelled while painting low or degraded nature, among objects which, unless merely subservient to finer and higher elements equally well drawn and finished, never can awaken our nobler sympathies"⁷⁰. The Spectator expressed a similar opinion, denying that it would wish to banish from fiction "all that is vulgar and low", but continuing:

At the same time, such materials should never be made the staple of a long story; because our sympathies can only occasionally be excited for the actors, and because, though the higher will always yield moral instruction to the lower, the lower will more rarely yield it to the higher. . . .⁷¹

Both of these reviewers felt that, in Oliver, Dickens had dwelt with too great a fascination on the vulgar aspect of life to the exclusion of its higher and more moral elements. Neither critic proceeded as far as Melbourne, since they did not demand the absence from literature of debased personages, but they did believe, with Ruskin, that if ugliness and deformity were shown they must be "subservient" to beauty.

By far the most violent attack on Oliver came from Richard Ford, writing with scant regard for accuracy :

⁶⁹ The Girlhood of Queen Victoria, a Selection from her Diaries, 1832 - 40. (ed. Viscount Esher, 1912), ii, 144.

⁷⁰ Monthly Review, January 1839, 40 - 1.

⁷¹ Spectator, 24 November 1838, xi, 1115.

The lower we descend in the social scale . . .
 the nearer we approach to the brute, devoid of
 any thought beyond sensual necessities and
 gratifications, destruction, and reproduction
 It is perfectly natural that Oliver
 Twist, which is made up of delineating these
 propensities, should be the joy of the ten-
 pounders ⁷²

Ford, gazing into the depths of society, saw only animals. Recoiling from the spectacle of bestiality with exaggerated horror - there was, after all, no "reproduction" in Oliver - he exhorted Dickens, in a passage which amounted to a statement of preference for "silver-fork" fiction, to shun such characters as Sikes, Fagin and Nancy, and to seek out the "witty men and pretty women . . . decent books and cooks" with which London could so easily furnish him.⁷³ Throughout his review, Ford questioned the wisdom of presenting the criminal classes in a novel, and evinced particular anxiety about the effect of scenes of degradation upon the young mind :

we grieve that the deformity of nakedness should not only be exhibited to the rising generation, but rendered agreeable by the undeniable drollery Our youth should not even suspect the possibility of such hidden depths of guilt, for their tender memories are wax to receive and marble to retain. These infamies feed the innate evil principle, which luxuriates in the supernatural and horrid, the dread and delight of our childhood, which is never shaken off, for no man entirely outlives the nursery.⁷⁴

Elsewhere Ford referred to youth in terms of "the heart pure as a pearl"⁷⁵, but in the passage quoted here he was certainly not charging

⁷² Quarterly Review, June 1839, lxiv, 86 - 7.

⁷³ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 97.

Dickens with the corruption of innocence, but rather with assisting in a process of infection which had already begun from within. The young were "tender", but they were also tainted with "the innate evil principle " of original sin. Ford was not impressed with the goodness of Oliver, on the grounds that "Workhouse boys are not born with original virtue"⁷⁶, and this doctrine he applied to the entire human race. His excessive reaction to Dickens's novel sprang from a fear of seeing reflected in fiction the darkness which he believed lay at the heart of mankind. His revulsion from the beasthood of men revealed a fundamental lack of faith in their potential godhood, and indicated the Puritan gloom which underlay Victorian optimism.

It was never supposed by critics, however, even by Ford, that the portrayal of criminals in fiction would lead to an increase in real life crime. Their fear was that the adventures of Sikes, Fagin and the Dodger would encourage, if not admiration for vice, at least, as Ford suggested, a morbid interest in it. The public, lamented Thomas Cleghorn of the North British Review in 1845, "learn to demand an insight into the haunts of crime, and to desire a familiarity with the habits and adventures of the profligate and brutal."⁷⁷ Oliver, appearing in the same decade as the "Newgate" novels of Bulwer and Ainsworth, was inevitably identified with an unhealthy appetite among the popular readership for sensational literature. The Athenaeum, in a review of Ainsworth's Jack Sheppard in 1839, allowed Dickens a moral aim, which distinguished him from his fellow-novelist, but the critic suspected that this was "precisely the excellence which . . . the readers of Boz most frequently overlook". It was not their philosophy

⁷⁶ Ibid., 96.

⁷⁷ North British Review, May 1845, iii, 69.

which sold his books so much as "the strong flavour of the medium" by which he rendered his more serious purpose palatable to the multitude. His popularity was in all likelihood due to the current "incapacity for sympathizing with the elevated and the ennobling"⁷⁸. Thus, although he was cleared from the charge of deliberately catering for the lowest tastes, the effect of this article was even so to reduce his work to the level of Ainsworth's, since it was indistinguishable in effect if not in intention. The Metropolitan Magazine, which enthusiastically defended him from association with the "Newgate" writers, likewise ended by treating him almost as a member of that group. He had been the initiator, albeit unconsciously, of the new movement, for his interest in the life of the masses had given rise to "the felon school" of novelists. The tendency of his own fiction had been "virtuous, and sometimes ennobling", but his followers had depraved "the million, who feed so greedily upon the coarse stimulants that produce morbid excitement."⁷⁹ This admission - which in any case was not chronologically accurate - that Dickens had been the innocent cause of the literary disease of the 30's was scarcely the most effective way to dissociate him from the crudities of Ainsworth.

Throughout the 40's he continued to be taken to task for his predilection for low and vicious subjects, which showed him to be a writer incapable of dealing with the loftier elements of human experience. W.E. Aytoun, in Blackwood's of 1846, drew attention to the coarseness of Dickens's tastes, in his advice to "T. Smith, Esq.", an imaginary young novelist who possessed all the worst faults of "Boz".

⁷⁸ Athenaeum, 26 October 1839, 803 - 4.

⁷⁹ Metropolitan Magazine, August 1840, xxviii, 102.

The aspiring serialist was counselled to avoid material which, though real, could only discomfort and perhaps degrade the reader: "The fetid den of the Jew, the stinking cellar of the thief, the squalid attic of the prostitute, are not haunts for honest men, and the less that we know of them the better Nature is not always to be painted as she really is."⁸⁰ Later in his essay Aytoun ironically congratulated "Smith" on the accurate idea of life in England which a foreigner would derive from his works: "You will convince him that a great part of our existence is spent about the doors of theatres, in tap-rooms, pot-houses, and other haunts, which I need not stay to particularize."⁸¹ In the year preceding this article, Theodore Martin, Aytoun's collaborator in Bon Gaultier Ballads (1844) and later his biographer, had expressed similar opinions of Dickens's limited range, through the mouth of his character, "Young Scotland": "He is great in the pot-house and theatre; quite a Smollett in the gin-shop; clear, minute, and forcible in his delineations of Saint Giles In his ideas he is essentially plebeian."⁸² This liking for unsavoury localities was also criticised by the Oxford and Cambridge Review in 1846, which held Dickens largely responsible for misleading public taste, and warned him that imagination could not flourish in "stable yards and coach-houses" or in thieves' kitchens.⁸³ The blame for prevailing literary standards was also placed on him by the Times, which mounted a series of attacks on his minor works, the Christmas books and Pictures from Italy (1846), between 1845 and 1848. The

⁸⁰ "Advice to an Intending Serialist", Blackwood's Magazine, November 1846, lx, 594 - 5.

⁸¹ Ibid., 605.

⁸² "Nights in the Martello", Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, April 1845, xii, 239.

⁸³ Oxford and Cambridge Review, January 1846, ii, 47.

present tendency "to write downwards rather than upwards" sprang, the paper's critic argued, from Dickens's unrivalled and undeniably impressive facility in "delineating the characters and imitating the language of the humbler section of humble life". The unhealthy state of popular literature was in great measure due to his "vicious though brilliant example, rewarded with extreme success, and sustained by morbid appetite."⁸⁴ This was much the judgement also of a writer in the North British Review of 1847, probably Coventry Patmore⁸⁵, who felt that Dickens would be seen by posterity as "the leader of a great literary revolution" but that he had directed fiction "downwards, despite the many beauties of this lower region"⁸⁶. Patmore shared the feeling of Aytoun and Martin that an author whose personages were almost entirely denizens of St. Giles and Saffron Hill could not possibly be considered as a serious artist concerned with providing a complete account of man's soul.

During the 40's there was also some distaste among critics for the Dickensian grotesques, in whom the image of divine humanity was as distorted as in Bill Sikes. Thomas Cleghorn, in the North British Review of 1845, called Quilp "a grotesque monster, an impossible incarnation of fiendish attributes", while Sairey Gamp he found "offensive and intolerable"⁸⁷. In 1847, the Westminster Review reserved differing responses for differing aspects of Dickens's work, praising the death of Nell as "a tragedy of the true sort, that which

⁸⁴ Times, 27 December 1845, 6.

⁸⁵ The author may have been David Masson; see Appendix.

⁸⁶ "Popular Serial Literature", North British Review, May 1847, vii, 114.

⁸⁷ North British Review, May 1845, iii, 70, 73.

softens, and yet strengthens and elevates"⁸⁸, but also declaring: "There are no such monsters in God's creation as Quilp, the dwarf, and Dennis, the hangman; powerful, but repulsive sketches, of which we would fain banish the remembrance." The optimistic creed to which Dickens himself claimed to subscribe was here turned against him, for the critic, recoiling from Quilp and Dennis, concluded: "Nothing that breathes is wholly vile"⁸⁹. Earlier, in 1843, the same periodical's notice of Martin Chuzzlewit displayed a similar conviction that Dickens's delineation of character was a libel upon human nature. The novel introduced the reader "to a world of knaves and fools, destitute of any one quality that could command respect." The reviewer looked back nostalgically to the author's earlier productions:

we contemplate human nature in 'Martin Chuzzlewit' only under an aspect which inspires loathing, and we can scarcely believe that we are reading the work of a writer once remarkable for a keen perception of the poetry of humble life; one who had shown us God's image reflected back from the haunts of poverty⁹⁰

The quest for "Worth in low places" had, for this critic, been abandoned for the selfishness, violence and grotesquerie of young Martin, Jonas Chuzzlewit and Mrs. Gamp. The personages with whom Dickens now occupied himself could offer no comfortable interpretation of humanity. Quilp and Dennis, and the characters of Chuzzlewit, like the low-life figures in Oliver, represented all that was most debased in man. Though often ready to accept Dickens when he wrote of Little

⁸⁸ "The Province of Tragedy - Bulwer and Dickens", Westminster Review, April 1847, xlvii, 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁰ "New Novels", Westminster Review, December 1843, xl, 457 - 8.

Nell, some critics felt unable to face the darker side of his art, which raised too many doubts about the dignity of the species.

Francis Jeffrey, formerly the opponent of Wordsworth but by 1847 the self-styled "Critic Laureate"⁹¹ of the novelist who had some claims to be Wordsworth's successor, had no hesitation in deciding to which of the two voices of Dickens he wished to listen. He had wept copiously over Nell, and in 1843 was so charmed by A Christmas Carol that he wrote to the author :

The whole scene of the Cratchetts [sic] is like the dream of a beneficent angel in spite of its broad reality, and little Tiny Tim . . . almost as sweet and as touching as Nelly

And is not this better than . . . lavishing your great gifts of fancy and observation on Pecksniffs, Dodgers, Bailleys [sic], and Moulds. Nor is this a mere crotchet of mine, for nine-tenths of your readers, I am convinced, are of the same opinion; and accordingly, I prophecy that you will sell three times as many of this moral and pathetic Carol as of your grotesque and fantastical Chuzzlewits. ⁹²

Jeffrey saw in Dickens's work, on the one hand, love for the higher and more tender features of life, and, on the other, caricature and grotesque fantasy issuing in a low estimate of mankind. Having purported to show the "angel" in man, he insisted, after all, on introducing into his fiction the uncouthness and deformity of the ape. His exploration of the social depths revealed the light which glimmered at the bottom of the abyss but it also uncovered levels of darkness which were, in the opinion of Jeffrey and Melbourne, best left unplumbed, or at least, as others argued, should be set firmly in perspective.

⁹¹ Lord Cockburn, Life of Lord Jeffrey (Edinburgh, 1852), ii, 425.

⁹² Ibid., 380 - 1.

against the heights to which the human spirit was capable of rising. Depending upon which part of his work was emphasised he could appear as both optimist and pessimist, though he could be praised only in the former rôle.

(iii)

To those critics who believed that art should paint man in his higher moods, Dickens, with his liking for low-life, failed to proceed beyond the foothills of Mount Parnassus. He possessed, said Theodore Martin's "Young Scotland", "no high or exalted imagination"⁹³. The Athenaeum thought him equally restricted: "if he were once lifted from the earth he would lose much of his strength - he is not for the 'cloud-capp'd towers and gorgeous palaces', for he could not be easy in them or near them."⁹⁴ For these readers the solid down-to-earth reality praised by Forster was not sufficient. One disadvantage of Dutch painting was its inability to rise from the realm of the purely physical into that of spiritual truth.

From the very beginning of his career, Dickens had been regarded as an author who showed a talent for observation and reproduction of surface phenomena but whose genius was not that of a poet. He mirrored the world which passed before him, but his vision only encompassed material objects and could not enter the reality which lay beyond appearances. Even those who admired him tended to stress his mimetic rather than imaginative abilities. Thus R.H. Horne spoke of his "copying . . . down"⁹⁵ what he saw, while the Dublin University Magazine in 1838, thought that he made "a faithful transcript" of

⁹³ Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, April 1845, xii, 239.

⁹⁴ Athenaeum, 3 December 1836, 843.

⁹⁵ Op. Cit., 52.

"his own close and accurate observations of nature."⁹⁶ His future father-in-law, George Hogarth, praised Sketches in the Morning Chronicle as the work of an "acute observer"⁹⁷, the Sun thought their principal merit to be "their matter-of-factness, and the strict, literal way in which they adhere to nature"⁹⁸, and the Morning Post was impressed by the new writer's "graphic descriptions"⁹⁹. Pickwick also earned favourable reports of its "literal" truth to life. Chambers's Edinburgh Journal commended Dickens for his "close perception, not only of character, but of every minute circumstance and local peculiarity"¹⁰⁰, and Mary Russell Mitford wrote of the book's "graphic" quality.¹⁰¹ To each of these readers of Dickens's first publications their most astonishing feature was their fidelity to actual life. But the use of such words as "matter-of-factness", "literal" and "graphic", and the insistence on the power of Dickens's eyes rather than on the force of his creative genius, made him seem little more than a camera, and lent substance to the view that he lacked imaginative insight into the human soul.

Horne, while himself offering some support to this approach, was also anxious to show that Dickens's art possessed universal implications. He was certainly not a visionary: "His universality does not extend beyond the verge of the actual and concrete. The ideal and the elementary are not his region."¹⁰² The "elementary" characteristics

⁹⁶ Dublin University Magazine, December 1838, xii, 700.

⁹⁷ Morning Chronicle, 11 February 1836.

⁹⁸ Sun, 15 February 1836.

⁹⁹ Morning Post, 12 March 1836, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, 29 April 1837, vi, 109.

¹⁰¹ Life, iii, 78.

¹⁰² Op. cit., pp. 48 - 9.

of man, those which were common to all ages and all countries and were not simply the products of a particular state of society, lay outside his range, for he always commenced, said Horne, "by showing how the nature of the individual has been developed externally by his whole life in the world."¹⁰³ It was thus man in relation to his circumstances, rather than man in relation to infinity, in whom Dickens was interested. He nonetheless treated of universal human nature, even if only within the bounds of society. He shared with Hogarth a tragic power "not at all in the ideal world, nor yet to be regarded as mere harsh, unredeemed matter-of-fact reality - but of the profoundest order." Neither the artist nor the novelist had portrayed tragic character "in the higher or more essential sense of the term": "In their works no one dies for a noble purpose, nor for an abstract passion." Instead: "Their tragedy is the constant tragedy of private life - especially with the poorer classes."¹⁰⁴ Between the lofty greatness of heroic drama, where the characters moved in complete freedom from the conditions of the workaday world, and the "harsh, unredeemed matter-of-fact reality" of absolute truth to common life, there existed, Horne supposed, a viable sphere in which true art could operate. Residing in the actual, Dickens was yet capable of turning his observations of the material world to a higher purpose than that of simple mimicry. While the "ideal" artist portrayed humanity in its nobler flights, the novelist sought out the incidents of ordinary life in which some hint of the "ideal" lay dormant. Clearly, for Horne, the romance of reality occupied a lower rank than romance itself. Though defending Dickens, he believed that the novel of social realism allowed a more limited expression of

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 8 - 9.

human potential than poetry and drama. This was a proposition that was later to be developed in Dickens's favour by David Masson.

Unlike Horne, the satirical magazine, Mephystopheles, in a notice of The Cricket on the Hearth in 1846, denied that Dickens had any talents other than those of a photographer. His subjects were firmly rooted in the world of physical objects:

You can limn capitally from small life, still or locomotive, but you are the worst of pencillers for a feat of imagination. I will back you to any amount against the whole banditti of our litteraires, penny-a-liners included, for a microscopic description of a fractured arm - chair or cracked teapot; but for an attempt which would ask you to go one inch beyond the nose of an actual palpable thing, I wouldn't peril a single fourpenny. Poetry - creative fiction - is not in your nature . . . to have instinctive perceptions of the possibilities of that infinite, human character, is the province . . . of the interpreter of the hidden life of nature, not of the surface nature of life.¹⁰⁵

The critic of John Bull, in 1848, wrote in similar vein. After reading The Haunted Man (1848), he invented a fiction of his own in which the genius of criticism appeared to an anonymous but "inimitable" author, to inform him that he stood "condemned in the high court of literary justice." His men and women lacked soul, each of them being nothing more than a "wickerwork of recollections, a string of transient sensations, skilfully twisted and spun out". Since he had "acknowledged nothing beyond the present", his name would "perish with the present", or would be known to posterity only as that of "one of the spoilers of

¹⁰⁵ Mephystopheles, 24 January 1846, i, 81.

this miserable age, who threw his small share of poison into the deadly cup of its materialistic existence." Not having seen further than the grave, he would not be remembered beyond the grave¹⁰⁶. John Bull and Mephystopheles were thus agreed on the "materialistic" nature of Dickens's fiction. His skill at Dutch painting, at the imitation of chairs and teapots, imprisoned him in the petty and often sordid circumstances of daily life. At the same time, by subscribing to the empiricist doctrine that the character was composed only of "sensations" and denying that there was a life after death of which man had instinctive knowledge, he reduced the human race to the level of brutes. His assumptions were, however, false, for man was "infinite", both in his capacity to rise above his environment and animal impulses into a purer region of the spirit and in his power of surviving death.

Thomas Cleghorn, of the North British Review, was another who took exception to the prominence which Dickens's methods gave to the purely physical. He felt that the Dutch minuteness for which the novelist had originally won fame, so far from revealing the poetry of commonplace experience, degraded man by rendering him subservient to inanimate objects. The effect of his pictures was that of a "photographic landscape" in which :

the imitating agent takes exactly the same pains with the dunghill and the gutter, as with the palace and the forest-tree; and it is as busy with the latchet of the shoe, and the pattern of the waistcoat, as with the noble features of the human face Neglecting the effective outline, the charm of harmonious grouping, and of contrasted light and shade, he crowds his canvass [sic] with figures, and notes the very hat, and

¹⁰⁶ John Bull, 30 December 1848, 839.

neckcloth, and coat buttons of each; dwelling upon his city scenes, whether connected or not with the business in hand, till he has enumerated the tables and chairs, and even counted the panes of glass. There is no judicious perspective, and withdrawing from view of disagreeable particulars.¹⁰⁷

Partly, Cleghorn's attack was directed towards the materialism and the low-life qualities of Dickens's fiction, in which "disagreeable" features played so large a part, but he had become dimly conscious too of that atomistic vision which recent criticism has seized upon as a leading feature of the novels. If every inanimate object were to be granted individuality, then all order disappeared from the universe. Man no longer stood at the centre of a divine scheme but instead had a value no greater than that of a table or a pane of glass. The relationship between humanity and its surrounding circumstances had been totally falsified. Other critics perceived that there was a further aspect to this distortion, which Cleghorn did not consider. Not only was the inanimate world unusually to the fore in Dickens's work, it had actually assumed animation. R.H. Horne discerned proof of Dickens's fertile genius in his endowing "inanimate objects . . . with consciousness and purpose"¹⁰⁸, but Parker's London Magazine lamented the constant discovery of "'tongues in trees', or any other inanimate things"¹⁰⁹, and Aytoun, bestowing ironical congratulations on his imaginary "Smith", was highly scornful of the animistic technique:

What I admire most . . . is your fine feeling of
humanity - the instinct . . . and dumb life which you
manage to extract from inanimate objects as

¹⁰⁷ North British Review, May 1845, 111, 78.

¹⁰⁸ A New Spirit of the Age, 1, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Parker's London Magazine, February 1845, 1, 124.

well as from articulately-speaking men. Your very furniture has a kind of automaton life; you can make an old chest of drawers wink waggishly from the corner, and a boot-jack in your hands becomes a fellow of infinite fancy. This is all very pleasant and delightful; though I think, upon the whole, you give us a little too much of it, for I cannot fancy myself quite comfortable in a room with every article of the furniture maintaining a sort of espionage upon my doings.¹¹⁰

Though this criticism was humorously phrased, it contained at the end a hint of something more sinister; Aytoun, if only in jest, was partly aware of the interaction between men and things in the Dickens world, and of the disquieting implications of this, but he did not proceed beyond a condemnation of animism on grounds of mere comic vulgarity.

(iv)

In spite of the distaste for pictures of vulgar objects which united Cleghorn and Aytoun, the latter critic was clearly not complaining simply that Dickens limited himself to material reality. His objection in the passage quoted above was rather that the novelist had wilfully distorted reality by imposing upon it his own fantasies. As Horne fleetingly recognised, fiction in Dickens's hands could no longer be regarded as a reflection of generally accepted objective truths. It had become the expression of a subjective vision :

To his perceptions, old deserted broken-windowed houses grow crazed with "staring each other out of

¹¹⁰ Blackwood's, November 1846, lx, 600.

countenance", and crook-backed chimney-pots in cowls turn slowly round with witch-like mutter and sad whispering moan, to cast a hollow spell upon the scene. ¹¹¹

Dickens had shown life as it appeared 'to his perceptions' and to no other persons's, and his work was therefore expressive rather than mimetic. Though dealing with features of the world around him, he interpreted them in a highly idiosyncratic fashion, and this, so far from being accepted by critics as proof of the imagination which they so often denied him, was taken by some reviewers, less admiring than Horne, to indicate that, even in the restricted area from which he had chosen to draw his material, he was an inferior artist. He was not content to mirror reality but must always present it in his own peculiar manner. His animism, like the pathetic fallacy of the Romantic poets, constituted an intrusion of the subjective consciousness between reader and object. Yet this fact was obscured in hostile notices of his novels. Instead of attacking him as a writer who insisted on substituting a personal world-view for the objective facts of the universe, his opponents chose instead to consider him in the less important role of a mannerist. This was perhaps an inevitable consequence of his reputation as a Dutch painter, for the artists of that school, as Ruskin pointed out in 1843, besides being interested only in the imitation of familiar things, were guilty of self-consciously asserting their own mimetic skills at the expense of their subject-matter. It was of a similar crime that Dickens was convicted in the 40's. His minute description of commonplace features, which had once seemed refreshingly perceptive, had, it was alleged,

¹¹¹ Op. cit., p.22.

degenerated into a frantic search for new points of strangeness in the details of everyday life, merely for the sake of maintaining the author's reputation for unparalleled observation. Ruskin himself, as early as 1841, was probably the first to note that Dickens's original talent had deteriorated into self-indulgent repetition: "he ought to keep quiet for a long time, and raise his mind as far as in him lies, to a far higher standard, giving up that turn for the picturesque which leads him into perpetual mannerism"¹¹². It was in the limited sense of self-display, not the wider one of subjectivism, that Dickens was considered a novelist whose art was too much affected by personality.

Several writers in the 40's commented on the self-consciousness of his attempts to extract meaning from the everyday. His power of placing the commonplace in a new light had betrayed him, said Samuel Warren in Blackwood's of 1842, into "straining after, and forcing out, these hidden qualities and effects, instead of . . . allowing them to exude before the eye of a minute and penetrating observation."¹¹³ Thomas Cleghorn, in 1845, made a similar point. Dickens, he said, had been famed once "for giving life to inanimate scenes, and catching the little characteristic traits of conduct and character; but he now carries minute description to an excess that sometimes, indeed, degenerates into mere extravagance"¹¹⁴. This verdict was echoed by the Economist in the following year: "Mr. Dickens, and with him all the writers of his school, appear to expect increased popularity, from carrying the minute detail of trifling matters, which at first

¹¹² Letter to W.H. Harrison, Works, xxxvi, 26.

¹¹³ Blackwood's, December 1842, lxi, 785.

¹¹⁴ North British Review, May 1845, lxi, 77.

startled and pleased from its novelty, and which will continue to please, if kept within bounds, into positive exaggeration."¹¹⁵ Inevitably, the Times, Dickens's arch-enemy in the second half of the 40's, added its disapproval. His best passages, its critic admitted in 1848, were "those in which some visible object is set forth with all its minutiae", but this microscopic skill had become a wearisome vice.¹¹⁶ For each of these critics, Dickens's interest in detail had become a mannerism. Continually on the lookout for small points to which he might give undeserved prominence, he had lost sight of the external realities which he had begun by illuminating. Spurred on by the desire to reap the benefits of success, he had fallen into the trap of repeating over and over, to the point of excess, the type of observation which had brought him fame and fortune. This belief enabled reviewers to discount the grotesque nature of his vision, by making it appear that his very individual treatment of inanimate objects was not the expression of a genuinely personal world-view but merely a clever trick designed to keep the favour of the public.

In another area, that of style, the same critical failure, or perhaps even unwillingness, to grasp the full implications of his art prevailed. The strongly-marked diction in which he embodied his animistic, atomistic interpretation of life was treated as a further trick intended to impress the reader with the author's ingenuity. When Aytoun told "Smith", "You have . . . undertaken to frame a new code of grammar and of construction for yourself"¹¹⁷, he was accusing Dickens

¹¹⁵ Economist, 12 December 1846, iv, 1622.

¹¹⁶ Times, 21 December 1848, 8.

¹¹⁷ Blackwood's, November 1846, lx, 605.

not of creating a style under the pressure of his own imaginative needs, but of distorting language, as he had done reality, for purposes of self-display. Ostentation was the great fault of Dickens as a stylist, in the eyes of many of his contemporaries. Even Forster wrote in 1839, of the reflective rather than the descriptive passages in the novels: "Mr. Dickens occasionally overlays his thoughts with needless epithets, and is over profuse in his use of adjectives."¹¹⁸ The Athenaeum found the humour of Nickleby "minute and wordy"¹¹⁹, while the Metropolitan Magazine noticed in The Old Curiosity Shop a tendency "which we find is increasing upon him, towards the bombastic."¹²⁰ By the mid-1840's, the exaggeration of his style was a powerful weapon in the armoury of his detractors. Cleghorn believed that the earlier novels had shown "purity and unassuming excellence", but that, by 1845, these qualities had given way to "impurities of expression" of the type favoured in Chuzzlewit: "impracticable nightcaps, impossible tables and exploded chests of drawers, mad closets, inscrutable harpsichords"¹²¹. Parker's London Magazine, in the same year, drew a similar line between an early style which perfectly mirrored its content and a later style indulged in for its own sake. The style of the early "Boz" had contained "no straining after effect - none of the ornaments are fastened on, and fit badly, they arise, if at all, out of the essential structure", whereas the later manner, that of Dickens rather than "Boz", was, by contrast, "laboured and artificial", betraying the influence of Carlyle's

¹¹⁸ Examiner, 27 October 1839, 678.

¹¹⁹ Athenaeum, 31 March 1838, 227.

¹²⁰ Metropolitan Magazine, December 1840, xxix, 111.

¹²¹ North British Review, May 1845, iii, 76.

German tone and the quaintness of Tennyson. This second style, said Parker's critic, possessed the "lifeless" beauty of a statue¹²², a comparison which hardly seemed to accord with any writing resembling Carlyle's. Since Dickens was taken to task, earlier in the same article, for indulging, after Oliver, in an increasing "mixture of the artificial with the natural"¹²³, the statue image must have been intended to convey the idea that a spontaneous gift for fresh and original observation had hardened into the marble rigidity of contrived mannerism. Dickens, Mephystopheles pointed out in 1846, was "the priest of art" rather than "the minister of nature"¹²⁴. Just as his search for the romance of reality had become, as Samuel Warren remarked, a self-conscious "straining after hidden qualities", so his desire for novelty of expression produced a "straining after effect", away from life towards an exhibition of linguistic skills.

In the minor works of the 40's, the Christmas books and Pictures from Italy, he was particularly vulnerable to such attacks. In Pictures, said the Times, he amply availed himself "of his license to employ, at any cost or risk, the most exaggerated similes and far-fetched metaphors." His style resembled "a madman let loose". Especially objectionable was his habit of falling into "the literary ventriloquial" manner, which aimed at "producing in words to the eye precisely the same effects as ventriloquism achieves in sounds to the ear"¹²⁵. The Times critic was thinking here of the cracking of the coachman's whip described in Pictures ("Going through France") and of the chirping of the cricket and the whistling of the kettle evoked in The Cricket on

122 Parker's London Magazine, February 1845, i, 124.

123 Ibid., 122.

124 Mephystopheles, 24 January 1846, i, 81.

125 Times, 1 June 1846, 7.

the Hearth. The latter book with its embarrassingly whimsical narrator provided an easy target. The Union Magazine, in 1846, after quoting from the story, commented: "Mr. Dickens's style is thoroughly decomposed into twaddle."¹²⁶ Less offensively, the Economist, having expressed a wish that the book had opened more simply, remarked: "The ornate style, too, of Mr. Dickens might, we think, have sometimes assumed Miss Austin's [sic] plainness of writing with advantage."¹²⁷ And Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal was irritated by the plentiful and exhibitionist similes :

The reader has perhaps met with a wearisome companion, whose every expression was manifestly intended to convey a bright idea. This is Mr. Dickens' wit. A horse stamping with his foot is, in Mr. Dickens' style, represented as "tearing up the road with his impatient autographs" Of Tackleton we are informed that his selfishness "peered out of one little corner of one little eye like the concentrated essence of any number of ravens." All this is truly wretched¹²⁸

More clearly here than elsewhere, the objection was to the intrusiveness of Dickens's narrative voice. His only concern, this critic decided, was to impress his listeners with the cleverness of his images. Manner had triumphed completely over matter.

Yet though all the critics quoted here on Dickens's stylistic deficiencies would have agreed with Coventry Patmore, who wrote in 1847 that "Piquancy and quaintness have too much subsided into fixed mannerism"¹²⁹, and with Macphail's critic who discovered in 1849

¹²⁶ Union Magazine, February 1846, i, 235.

¹²⁷ Economist, 3 January 1846, iv, 9.

¹²⁸ Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal, February 1846, i, 75.

¹²⁹ North British Review, May 1847, vii, 114.

that The Haunted Man abounded "with the Author's worst mannerisms"¹³⁰, some of them were probably as much influenced, in their reactions to Dickens's use of language, by distaste for his matter as by dislike of his manner. Clearly Cleghorn's objection to such coinages as "mad closets" and "inscrutable harpsichords" was in part a condemnation of the animistic method mocked by Aytoun, and the same was perhaps true of the Times's attack on "the literary ventriloquial" style. The distortions of language were inseparable from those of external reality, and the stylistic madness discerned by the Times was a fitting expression of the turbulence of the Dickens world, in which, said John Eagles of Blackwood's, "every character is in extreme . . . every thing exaggerated."¹³¹ The darker aspects of the novelist's vision, its restlessness and grotesquerie, were reflected in his departure from what Tait's Edinburgh Magazine called "pure and classical writing". His style confirmed that he was not the "pure" mirror in which the age might see its spiritual reflection, but rather the cracked glass which gave back only false images. When he was convicted of mannerism, it was not simply because he had intruded himself between audience and object, but because his minute Dutch descriptions and strongly-marked style contributed to the debasement of man which had been begun by his depictions of low-life.

Two quite different views of Dickens emerged from the criticism of his work in the 30's and 40's. However, the standards which hostile reviewers brought to bear on his books were substantially those of his

¹³⁰ Macphail's, January 1849, vi, 431.

¹³¹ "A Few Words about Novels - a Dialogue", Blackwood's, October 1848, lxiv, 468.

supporters also. The two parties differed only in the extent to which they believed that Dickens conformed to mutually accepted criteria.

To his admirers, his writings chimed in exactly with certain aspects of the early Victorian mood. He had offered them pictures of ordinary and familiar persons who trod the cobblestones of London, and so had answered the need for a literature more realistic and less transcendental than that of Byron and Bulwer. At the same time he had satisfied the emotional demands of the age by his faith in the unquenchable human spirit rising superior to circumstances and by his talent for tracing the soul of goodness in things evil and paradise in the commonplace. In the double rôle of realist and seeker-out of virtue, he could be loved as the artist who provided the clear mirror of objective truth. To critics who looked into his glass from a different angle, on the other hand, it showed only distorted images of reality. The low-life and criminal characters who played so large a part in his stories seemed morbid and unflattering portraits of man's lower nature, while his grotesque comic and semi-comic figures were monstrous disfigurements of the human race. This tendency towards grotesquerie was apparent also in his vision of an atomistic world in which even the distinction between men and objects was in danger of being lost. That minute Dutch painting which had once pleased by its novelty came to be regarded, since its effect was to make the soul no more infinite than a teapot, as a denial of man's spirituality, and was condemned, together with the style that was employed in it, as self-consciously mannered. Thus, to his detractors, Dickens was identified with cynicism, empiricism and, to some extent, egoism.

Between these two diametrically opposed attitudes to his work

there was a complete separation. No one ventured to suggest, for instance, that he was a novelist in whom optimism and pessimism were in conflict. Instead, the two sides of his outlook were discussed in isolation. Those who disliked him emphasised the darker aspects of his writings and minimised the brighter, while admirers dwelt upon the latter and ignored the former. Even readers who, like Lord Jeffrey, recognised that Dickens spoke with two voices, refused to allow that both were valid or that they had any organic connection with one another. Since all critics (supporters and opponents of Dickens alike) were dogmatically guided by similar moral standards — few, if any, of them would have claimed that the artist had any right to be either gloomy or subjective in his approach to life — they could not perhaps, for their own peace of mind, acknowledge the possibility of uncertainty or ambivalence, even in the minds of others. A man must be either basically for or against the creeds which they espoused. Thus, the existence, pointed out by Sterling in 1839, of the half-man, divided between belief and scepticism was ignored by the early Dickens reviewers. The clash of faith and doubt, evident in Jeffrey's distinction between the "beneficent angel" of the Carol and the "grotesque" apes of Chuzzlewit, remained external, and was never regarded as possessing any relevance to the inner consciousness of the reader or critic.

CHAPTER THREE

DICKENS AND VANITY FAIR, 1848

Jane Carlyle, in a celebrated comment of 1847, made it clear, even before the serial publication of Vanity Fair was completed, that a new contender for fictional honours had appeared upon the literary scene. "I brought away the last four numbers of 'Vanity Fair'," she wrote to her husband, "and read one of them in bed, during the night. Very good, beats Dickens out of the world."¹

A lesser figure, Abraham Hayward, echoed this opinion a month later, in a letter to Thackeray himself: "you have completely beaten Dickens out of the inner circle already."² And seventeen years later, shortly after Thackeray's death, Henry Kingsley also recorded that Vanity Fair had taken precedence over the work of Dickens. "Its appearance", he claimed, "was a kind of era in the lives of men whose ages were at that time within four or five years of twenty; and, for aught we know, in the lives of men older and wiser." The "educated world" had been "taken by storm with the most remarkable novel in the English language". At that time, Kingsley recalled, "we had got to love Mr. Pickwick, the Brothers Cheeryble, and dear old Tom Pinch; and were conceiving an affectionate admiration of Edward Cuttle, mariner", but when the yellow numbers of this new work began to come out:

it became evident that the circle of our acquaintances had been suddenly and singularly enlarged; that we were becoming acquainted with people. . . who forced themselves on our notice, and engaged our attention, to a degree which none of our former acquaintances had ever succeeded in doing.

¹ Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle (ed. J.A. Froude, 3 vols., 1883), II, 3.

² Quoted by John Cordy Jeaffreson, A Book of Recollections (2 vols., 1894), I, 278.

Since the "dearest friends" of a typical reader, prior to this, were supposed by Kingsley to have been - in addition to the characters of Dickens - Hamlet, Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, Uncle Toby and Tom Jones³, the intended compliment to Thackeray was the highest possible.

Apart from placing Thackeray's most ardent readers among the new generation born in the early 30's and therefore growing up entirely in the early Victorian climate, Kingsley further narrowed the novelist's public down to the "educated world". However great the challenge which Thackeray posed to Dickens, it had no effect upon the latter's popular reputation. In 1848, the English Review, the first periodical to print a full-length comparison between the two authors, emphasised the difference between their respective audiences. Thackeray, on the strength of Vanity Fair alone, was entitled to rank with his immediate predecessor⁴, but whereas Dickens spoke "to rich and poor, high and low", his rival wrote purely "for the elect of mankind, for keen intellects and lofty minds": "He exercises the most potent influence over the greatest of his contemporaries, over those who in their turn are like to sway the mental world."⁵ Thackeray did not have Dickens's wide public, which cut across boundaries of class and education and was "the most mighty audience of all time", but Dickens, on the other hand, even when he appealed to the "rich" and "high", could not be supposed to do so on an intellectual level. Thackeray was regarded as addressing himself to a limited though important circle, and both friends and enemies would probably have agreed that he had introduced into the novel an element of intellectualism, which - whether one applauded it as realism or damned it as cynicism - had, for good or

³ Macmillan's Magazine, February 1864, ix, 356.

⁴ "Dickens and Thackeray", English Review, December 1848, x, 266.

⁵ Ibid., 275.

for ill, been absent from the work of Dickens. He was primarily a novelist for the discriminating and intelligent reader.

(i)

The one feature of Thackeray's work which received almost unanimous approval and established him as a writer for the more discerning members of the public was his style, which possessed the purity of that "classical writing" neglected by Dickens. The comparison between the two men on this score was seldom explicit, but the reviews of Vanity Fair and other Thackeray works of the late 40's, when read in the context of the attacks on Dickensian mannerism quoted in the preceding chapter, clearly show that a contrast was intended. Towards the end of 1848, for example, the Spectator's notice of Dr. Birch, Thackeray's Christmas book for that year, followed immediately upon one of The Haunted Man. The style of the latter, it was allowed, showed "less of stilt and struggle" than was usual with Dickens: "but it is too often artificial; and, unluckily, the author seems altogether to have depended upon mere writing for his effects." The standard objections to Dickens's style were here mustered once more. It drew attention to itself, and was the product of self-conscious art rather than of spontaneous nature. In Dr. Birch, on the contrary, the art was concealed and made to seem natural. There were "no mere phrases to fill the ear or the page": "every sentence is made to contribute to the effect, like the touches of a great artist or the movement of one cunning in fence. There is no 'damnable iteration', and very often a single sentence brings a world of character before the mind"⁶. The juxtaposition of these two books, one in which manner

⁶ Spectator, 23 December 1848, xxi, 1236 - 7.

was supreme and the other in which it was the perfect vehicle for matter, was plainly a deliberate one. Thackeray's virtues were to throw into relief the deficiencies of Dickens.

That other critics had the longer established novelist in mind when discussing Thackeray's style is suggested by the fact that they so often defined the latter, as the Spectator did, by reference to the bad qualities which it did not have, as if they were testing it against some pre-existent standard of faultiness. Reviewing Mrs. Perkins's Ball, Thackeray's 1846 Christmas book, the Morning Chronicle commented upon the "perfect simplicity of style and manner", and continued: "Mr. Thackeray never aims at 'fine writing'. He never appears to care about rearing a peculiarly smart or peculiarly pretty or picturesque sentence." ⁷ Several reviewers used the word "mannerism" to describe the 'smartness' which Thackeray avoided. One of the great charms of Vanity Fair, said Abraham Hayward in the Edinburgh Review, was "its entire freedom from mannerism and affectation both in style and sentiment", and :

the thoroughbred carelessness with which the author permits the thoughts and feelings suggested by the situations to flow in their natural channel, as if conscious that nothing mean or unworthy, nothing requiring to be shaded, gilded, or dressed up in company attire, could fall from him. ⁸

Robert Bell, in Fraser's Magazine, similarly remarked on "the absence of peculiarities in the diction", adding : "No writer was ever less of a mannerist" ⁹. The Dublin University Magazine noted likewise that there was "neither affectation nor mannerism . . . no straining after effect" ¹⁰.

⁷ Morning Chronicle, 29 December 1846, 5.

⁸ Edinburgh Review, January 1848, lxxxvii, 50.

⁹ Fraser's Magazine, September 1848, xxxviii, 333.

¹⁰ Dublin University Magazine, October 1848, xxxi, 447.

These references to "mannerism" and "straining" almost certainly implied a comparison between Thackeray's willingness to let his material flow in its "natural channel" and the artificiality favoured by Dickens, between the self-effacement of one novelist and the intrusiveness of the other.

At least two critics made a more or less open comparison between them on these grounds. Coventry Patmore explicitly mentioned the "far purer style both of thought and expression" which distinguished Thackeray from his fellow-novelist¹¹, while the Times made oblique but obvious references to the more recent works of Dickens in its notice of Thackeray's Our Street (1847) :

There is no one who can tell so much in so few words [as Thackeray] . In a line thrown out artfully, in an effortless reflection, perhaps in a name, he will give you a sketch redolent of truth and individuality. He is none of those who try to cram a character down your throat, by heaping it up with description, - he will not set a kettle whistling through a couple of pages, or a whip cracking through a chapter. He is economical of his words. He drops his sentences for those to pick them up who are able to appreciate them, but with apparent unconcern whether they are appreciated or not. It is not by minute Dutch painting that he hits off his portraits, but a few strokes, strongly and skilfully dealt, are sufficient to execute his design.¹²

Thackeray was therefore entirely free from what the Times had, in 1846, referred to as "the literary ventriloquial" manner practiced by Dickens. The antithesis which other critics had hinted at between the artifice of one author and the naturalness of the other was here

¹¹ North British Review, May 1847, vii, 120.

¹² Times, 11 January 1848, 8.

brought virtually into the open. Moreover, the objection to "minute Dutch painting" went beyond style to hint at differences between the two writers' attitudes to human experience, an aspect of the comparison which the Times was later to expand in its review of Vanity Fair¹³.

So eager, in fact, were critics to repudiate artifice and to pay homage to nature, that they sometimes fell into the error of under-rating Thackeray's technical skills. Lewes wrote in the Morning Chronicle of 1848 :

He never frames and glazes his ideas. He never calls upon you to admire them by any trick of phrase or oddity of language. He does not insist upon your admiration - he wins it. The simplest words, and in the simplest manner, are used to bring out his meaning; and wit of the finest quality, as well as hearty humour, seem to spring from him without an effort. The ease of his writing is little less than marvellous; and to judge from the carelessness of his style in its idiomatic flow, we should suppose that it is really written with a facile, current pen.¹⁴

Lewes, like others, believed that Thackeray's style was dedicated, not to self-display, but to the clearest and purest expression of his subject. But, in stressing the spontaneous "flow" of this unobtrusive writing, Lewes, eager to exalt nature above art, made it seem that Thackeray achieved his aims without any labour or effort. Hayward's praise of "thoroughbred carelessness" pointed to the same conclusion, and the critic who reviewed Mrs. Perkins for the Morning Chronicle put the point with even greater naïveté: "He takes the words as they come,

¹³ See below, pp. 157 - 8.

¹⁴ Morning Chronicle, 6 March 1848, 3. But cf. the same critic on Thackeray's style in 1850: "It is devoid of trick though not devoid of art" (Leader, 21 December 1850, i, 929).

and the grand charm is, that what comes first appears to suit best."¹⁵ The apparent "ease" of his style deluded his readers into thinking, not that it possessed that art which concealed itself, but almost that it was without art at all.

The carelessness for which Thackeray was admired as a stylist was a sure sign of that freedom from the necessity of self-display which was an attribute of the well-bred man alone. An equation was clearly made between literary and social good manners. Hayward, on the same page that he praised Thackeray's unostentatious style, called Vanity Fair "the work of a gentleman"¹⁶. The Morning Chronicle, reviewing his travel book From Cornhill to Cairo (1846), applauded him for his skill in handling words "with a painter's knowledge of effect", and on the following page made the simple statement: "the writer is a gentleman"¹⁷. Similarly, Patmore, who remarked on Thackeray's restraint, declaring that if his vein were to be characterised by one word, "that one word should be Quietness", had immediately before observed that he was "first of all a gentleman"¹⁸. Dickens, on the other hand - though the fact was never phrased so bluntly - was not a gentleman, but a vulgar Cockney with a taste for low-life and a style as showy as his dress. Gilbert & Beckett's Almanack of the Month, in its notice of Cornhill to Cairo, urged its readers to buy the book if they wanted "humour without vulgarity or Cockneyism"¹⁹, a recommendation which surely glanced at Dickens. Thackeray's lack of ostentation was a natural consequence of his social background and of his education at Charterhouse and Cambridge. The natural modesty of the English

¹⁵ Morning Chronicle, 29 December 1846, 5.

¹⁶ Edinburgh Review, January 1848, lxxxvii, 50.

¹⁷ Morning Chronicle, 29 January 1846, 5 - 6.

¹⁸ North British Review, May 1847, vii, 119.

¹⁹ Almanack of the Month, February 1846, i, 107.

gentleman suited exactly an age which distrusted self-display and advocated self-effacement.

As a stylist, Thackeray undoubtedly had, for many of his readers, the clarity and purity which the early Victorians demanded from their art. His language was placed at the service of his material instead of distorting it. The same objectivity was manifested in his handling of emotion and sentiment. As Charlotte Brontë commented approvingly in 1848, his feeling "though he makes no noise about it, is about the most genuine that ever lived on printed page"²⁰. This absence of noisy exhibitionism was noted by others, who, while they regarded a measure of pathos as one of the necessary ingredients of a good novel, found Dickens's sentimentality too unrestrained for their liking. The latter writer's self-conscious theatricality was criticised by Bentley's

Miscellany in a review of Vanity Fair:

The power in Mr. Thackeray's book is great. It is not the power which foams at the mouth and clenches its fist to show you how strong it is - not the power which you see coming a very great way off, with terrible things in its wallet, holding back the same, as Mrs Peerybingle did the great fact of her justification in the memorable duett [sic] with her lord and master, that "the Cricket on the Hearth" might close with the expectedly - unexpected, dear, delightful stage embrace - but it is the power of reality. Our novelist knows that great words do not always come at great moments; that, in a crisis of terrible suspense or frightful emotion, lesser impressions strike, smaller feelings and fancies intrude . . . than the wholesale passion-mongers can either understand or reproduce.²¹

²⁰ Letter to W.S. Williams, 29 March 1848, The Brontës. Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence (4 vols., Shakespeare Head Brontë, ed. T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, 1932), ii, 201.

²¹ Bentley's Miscellany, September 1848, xxiv, 254.

The artificial quality of Dickens's language was thus paralleled by that of his melodrama, rendering even the "unexpected" totally expected. Just as his style was indulged in for self-display, so his great emotional scenes were designed not to mirror nature but to impress the watching audience. Art had again triumphed over nature. Thackeray, by contrast, was genuinely responsive to reality. He did not attempt to shape it artificially, but was content to reflect its simplicity and often its incoherence. The Times was equally appreciative of this lack of affectation :

There is no attempt to force the sentimental - not the slightest approach to the maudlin, but the touches of tenderness seem naturally to belong to the characters and to the texture of the work There is nothing more disgusting in a book than a scene in which the domestic affections are badly managed. A clumsy dealer in the sentimentalities of the hearth is not only unskilful, but is invariably obtrusive²²

The target of these slighting allusions to "the sentimentalities of the hearth" was, in view of the title of possibly the most notorious of Dickens's Christmas books, absolutely unmistakeable. The Times was again using Thackeray as a weapon with which to assault his rival, who introduced pathos into his work as a demonstration of his own powers and so thrust himself upon the attention of the reader to the detriment of his own responsiveness to life.

Respect for Thackeray as a man of feeling was not, however, so widespread as for his stylistic abilities. The English Review, drawing attention, like the Times, to the way in which his pathos came unsought out of the circumstances of the tale, thought it "very deep and very sweet" and none the less so "because used with a certain . . .

²² Times, 10 July 1848, 8.

reserve"²³. Although this particular critic felt that Thackeray's "reserve" enhanced the impression of genuine sensibility produced by his more emotional passages - there was "nothing . . . forced, nothing artificial" in his work, whereas Dickens had sometimes shown a "tendency to vague and pernicious sentimentalism"²⁴ - it seemed to others that such restraint amounted to an almost morbid mistrust of all gentler, purer feelings. Robert Bell, for instance, complained that the novelist could not "call up a tear without dashing it off with a sarcasm"²⁵, and Forster, though not denying Thackeray a heart, criticised him for stepping in so often between his reader and the nobler aspects of human existence :

we are seldom permitted to enjoy the appreciation of all gentle and kind things which we continually meet with in [Vanity Fair], without some neighbouring quip or sneer that would seem to show the author ashamed of what he yet cannot help giving way to .²⁶

Lewes, both in his Athenaeum and his Morning Chronicle reviews of the novel, was also disturbed by this internal struggle between sympathy and mockery:

Laughter becomes wearisome when too much prolonged, - for it is then a sort of blasphemy against the divine beauty which is in life. Mr. Thackeray grows serious and pathetic at times - but almost as if he were ashamed of it, like a man caught in tears at the theatre. It is one weakness of the satirist that he is commonly afraid of the ridicule of others!²⁷

So far from being objective, Lewes and Forster thought, Thackeray was

²³ English Review, December 1848, x, 273.

²⁴ Ibid., 273, 267.

²⁵ Fraser's Magazine, September 1848, xxxviii, 322.

²⁶ Examiner, 22 July 1848, 468.

²⁷ Athenaeum, 12 August 1848, 795.

so self-conscious that he continually had one eye fixed upon his audience in an attempt to judge the effect he was making upon them. He was afraid to give full scope to the more generous impulses of the heart lest he should cut a ridiculous figure before the public.

The Athenaeum, reviewing Our Street in 1848, ascribed this reluctance to show feeling to a quite justifiable dislike of current fictional trends :

Ours are days when "heart" is so outrageously traded upon, that we wonder not to see so fine an observer and so lively a writer refusing to join the company; displaying his sympathies charily, and in an apologetic sort of way - as if "the vulgar things" ought to be taken for granted or kept out of sight. A little more courage in the matter, however, would do Mr. Titmarsh no harm - while it would still leave him at many a furlong's distance from the manufacturing sentimentalists whose writings are almost enough to drive decent persons into crusty cynicism. ²⁸

Whether or not Dickens was to be identified with the "manufacturing sentimentalists", the contrivance of pathos to which this critic took exception was exactly the feature attacked by the Times and Bentley's Miscellany in Dickens's work. But the Athenaeum assigned a social as well as a literary provenance to Thackeray's reticence. If he was envisaged calling sympathies "vulgar things" it was because he was thought to be a gentleman, who believed in keeping his emotions to himself and felt that an open show of them was ill-bred. Good manners dictated his use of sentiment as they did his style. But while gentlemanly reserve was perfectly acceptable in the latter area, constituting a welcome change from mannerism, it was clearly less so when extended

to the domain of sentiment. Even Abraham Hayward, who, like the critic of the English Review, felt that Thackeray's restraint increased the effectiveness of his sentiment, would have apparently preferred, with the Athenaeum, a "little more courage in the matter": "His pathos (though not so deep as Mr. Dickens') is exquisite; the more so, perhaps, because he seems to struggle against it, and to be half ashamed of being caught in the melting mood"²⁹. Delicate as his effects were, the heart was touched more deeply by Dickens, and the shame which Hayward detected in Vanity Fair seemed to Lewes and Forster to verge on cynical mistrust of all genuine emotion. Thus the absence of distortion in Thackeray's pure diction was offset, in the eyes of some critics, by his self-conscious evasion of "the melting mood". His failure to combine clarity of style with fullness of sympathy prevented him from completely satisfying the needs of his age.

(ii)

For some readers the naturalness of his style was matched by his capacity for accurately reflecting the realities of the world around him. But the realism which they praised still often amounted to little more than the presentation of scenes with which they could feel they were familiar. Thus Henry Kingsley remembered that the characters of Vanity Fair "were so amazingly common-place . . . were like ourselves in detail."³⁰ The Morning Chronicle in 1846 had made much the same point about Mrs. Perkins, comparing it favourably with the latest Christmas book by Dickens :

²⁹ Edinburgh Review, January 1848, lxxxvii, 50.

³⁰ Macmillan's Magazine, February 1864, ix, 356.

What a perfect contrast does "Mrs. Perkin's Ball" present to the "Battle of Life!" The one is the very embodiment of keen, shrewd common sense; the other the very incarnation of riot-running fancy. Did anybody ever meet, see, or hear of such a monster as Clemency Newcome [in The Battle]? Never. But is there anybody in this world of London who goes to half-a-dozen parties in the year, or, indeed, who walks its streets with his eyes . . . open, who cannot recognize in a moment the wondrous truth which stamps and individualizes every one of the ladies and gentlemen who meet at Mrs. Perkins's in Pocklington - Square? ³¹

In this passage, the first important contrast between the two men, the yardstick of reality was social life in London, particularly among the pretentious lower reaches of the middle class. Thackeray's characters were recognisable - though only by a certain part of the public - as habitués of a particular section of London society, whereas Dickens's were grotesque distortions of the human race, subjective fantasies emanating from the author's own brain and bearing no resemblance to the people who were to be met with every day in the streets of the city. It was Thackeray not Dickens who was the down-to-earth realist, basing his work firmly upon objective actuality, though, as the Times was eager to prove, he did not fall into the error, attributed by some critics to his predecessor, of becoming trapped in the petty details of ordinary life :

Vanity Fair is widely different from those works, excellent in their way, in which the author's chief talent is shown in a faithful delineation of the external details of human life. There are writers who can give you a picture of a street or a room full of furniture with a perfection that leaves

³¹ Morning Chronicle, 29 December 1846, 5.

nothing to desire But often it happens that the writer who shines so much in minutiae is puzzled when he has to deal with humanity in situations where it is less blended with outward circumstances.

In Thackeray's novel, this critic continued, the humanities were "always the principal objects" and his details, though "accurate", were never permitted to "divert the attention from the main object of the book."³² Readers of the Times, and of other journals, would have been at no loss to identify the nameless purveyor of minutiae who was here contrasted with Thackeray. Vanity Fair did not rely upon Dutch painting for its effects - the same paper had already made this point with reference to Our Street - but upon the artist's knowledge of human nature. Man was restored to his proper place at the centre of the universe, and was no longer on a level with in-animate objects.

Yet the very nature of Thackeray's material meant that, like Dickens before him, he ran the risk of being considered a photographer rather than a creative artist. The truthfulness of Our Street, said the Morning Chronicle, was sufficient to make the reader forget that he was perusing fiction.³³ A critic in Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper wrote of the same work: "His descriptions are so exact, and his portraits so true, that we can only award him the merit of a historian"³⁴. Here "only" seems to have been intended as complimentary, but both of these critics nevertheless relegated Thackeray to a place lower than that occupied by more imaginative writers. The novelist who chose ordinary life as his arena was a chronicler of facts, an historian not a poet. This was the view of Thackeray taken

³² Times, 10 July 1848, 8.

³³ Morning Chronicle, 5 January 1848.

³⁴ Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper, 1 January 1848, 13.

by Coventry Patmore and by Robert Bell. According to Patmore, Thackeray and other (unspecified) authors of the same school did not "weave stories out of common things", as Jane Austen had done, but left them exactly as they found them.³⁵ This feeling that the author of Vanity Fair had done no more than transcribe the surface appearances of everyday life was expanded by Bell :

The universal traits and general truths which he scatters about are accidental, not elementary; his men and women are expressly denizens of Russell Square and Park Lane . . . his heads are portraits not passions; he describes less the philosophy of human action than the contrasts and collisions of a conventional world³⁶

The faithfulness to "this world of London", which constituted the prime charm of Mrs. Perkins for the Morning Chronicle, indicated to Bell that Thackeray was interested in manners rather than men. Dealing with the artificiality of upper-class society, he had no insight into the essential passions and feelings of human nature, but showed humanity determined by local conventions and as having no existence above the merely temporal conditions of materialistic existence.

This adherence to local truth and neglect of the elemental aspects of man was one factor which prevented Thackeray from being accepted as a complete artist who reflected all facets of the human soul. The other serious - and related - flaw in his outlook was the cynicism already hinted at in the remarks of Forster and Lewes on his treatment of sentiment. His concept of realism went beyond that of pictures of familiar and commonplace persons and objects to include a ruthless assessment of human motivation, a fact which the Dublin

³⁵ North British Review, May 1847, vii, 120.

³⁶ Fraser's Magazine, September 1848, xxxviii, 322.

University Magazine indirectly pointed out when, in 1848, it attempted to consider his methods as a continuation of those employed by Dickens. Before Dickens had begun to write, the Dublin critic recalled, the novel-reading public had loved tales of lords and ladies, "the most miserable and flimsy trash". Dickens had altered the direction of popular taste, by opening up "ancient wells of fresh and living beauty in the homely walks of every-day life", and Thackeray had followed his example in Vanity Fair, "presenting . . . features with which we were long familiar, but which we had never thought before of observing, and feelings which seemed hidden almost from ourselves."³⁷ This could certainly have been a description of the Dickens of the 30's, had it not been for the final words in which the critic registered an important difference between 1836 and 1848. Realism was no longer simply a matter of placing the known world in a new and poetic light but of ruthlessly exposing "feelings" which contained nothing of "fresh and living beauty" and which very often men had "hidden" from themselves because they were too ignoble to acknowledge. By his analyses of character, Thackeray had introduced into fiction a degree of self-consciousness which had been lacking in the work of Dickens, forcing the unwilling reader, as Robert Bell bore witness, by a merciless exhibition of "egotism, faithlessness, and low depravities" to gaze "into the depths of a loathsome truth which the best of us are willing enough to evade, if we can."³⁸ It was doubtless from a desire to escape the applicability to himself, and to mankind in general, of the novelist's dissection of human conduct that Bell stressed its purely social relevance, limiting it to Park Lane. Nor did his

³⁷ Dublin University Magazine, October 1848, xxxi, 445.

³⁸ Fraser's, 321.

admission of the "truth" of the exposure prevent him, on the very same page, from invoking more optimistic values: "Is there any den of vice so utterly depraved, any round of intercourse so utterly hollow and deceitful, that there is not some redeeming feature lurking somewhere, under rags or tinsel?"³⁹ The spirit of Dickens breathed through these lines, opposing faith in the "soul of goodness in things evil" to Thackeray's discovery of universal selfishness underlying the seeming virtue of the world. Like Eustace Conway, Bell found himself divided between Reason, which taught him to hope for human perfectibility, and Understanding and experience, which led him to doubt its possibility. Dickensian optimism was undermined by Thackerayan pessimism, and the two remained in unreconciled tension.

The unflattering estimate of human nature made by Vanity Fair brought protests from the majority of contemporary critics. Like Bell, none of them challenged the truth of what the book showed them. Instead they complained that it represented only a partial truth. Art, as the mirror of objective reality, must reflect the whole world not a portion of it, and the writer who did not include in his work at least one example of human dignity and strength could not be accounted a true realist. Reviewer after reviewer, confronted by the total impurity of character in Vanity Fair, and taking the subjective world-view of the novel as an attempted imitation of life as a whole, exclaimed indignantly that human nature was not all as weak and vicious as Thackeray portrayed it. If his novel failed to take a permanent hold, said the Athenaeum, it would be because its "Pen and Pencil Sketches" were rather of "mean persons" than, as its subtitle alleged, of "English society"⁴⁰. The critic of Bentley's Miscellany, though he used

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Athenaeum, 24 July 1847, 785.

Thackeray to attack the theatricality of Dickensian sentiment, was no less dismayed by this predilection for the smaller side of man :

Dobbin is its only personage . . . who is not, more or less, cruelly, inconsiderately selfish. Now the world is not so exclusively made up of Egotism "in many masks," as this would imply. There are holier spots of repose, purer bursts of sunshine, than any Mr. Thackeray has chosen to dwell upon; and, inasmuch as we mistrust and despise that maudlin optimism which, trying to make us love everything indiscriminately corrupts our taste, hoodwinks our experience, and ends in plunging us into severe and cynical injustice against those who really bear Life's burdens, so we cannot but deprecate that perpetual tendency towards the practice of morbid anatomy in which our author indulges.⁴¹

The "maudlin optimism" contrasted here with Thackeray's scepticism was perhaps that manifested in the work of Dickens. The most interesting point about this passage, however, was its use of the phrase "morbid anatomy", which set the tone for much of the later hostility towards Thackeray. Whether consciously or not, this critic had placed Vanity Fair on the side of science and empiricism, for "anatomy" was the spectre which haunted Carlyle, the practical expression of self-consciousness which would not have gained admission to Paradise. Its appearance in the criticism of fiction clearly marked the introduction into the English novel of that motive-seeking which was the distinguishing feature of Benthamism. Thackeray was identified with an analytical approach to life which, taking nothing at face-value, traced all conduct to self-interest and took no account of spirituality.

⁴¹ Bentley's Miscellany, September 1848, xxiv, 252 - 3.

Bentley's claim that there were "purer bursts of sunshine, than any Mr. Thackeray has chosen to dwell upon" was voiced also by Lewes, who believed that the novelist erred "as an artist and a teacher" in showing "everywhere corruption underneath the mask" :

he is not attentive enough to honour, and to paint what is high, and generous, and noble in human nature. Let us not be understood to say that he fails to honour the finer portion of our nature; but he does not honour it enough In Vanity Fair, his greatest work, how little is there to love! The people are all scamps, scoundrels, or humbugs.⁴²

Lewes objected specifically to the mixture of good and evil in the characters. The only people to show paternal affection were the foolish Rawdon and the coarse Mr. Osborne, while the only man with a noble heart, Dobbin, was made ridiculous. Virtue was debased, for Lewes, by this contact with vice and folly on the one hand and with awkward 'spooniness' on the other. There was no denying the naturalness of such characterisations - "We are perfectly aware of the truth of these portraits" - but Thackeray had made "the exception stand for the rule", by taking it for granted "that every one - reader and author included - is no more than a puny, miserable pretender; that most of our virtues are pretences, and when not pretences are only kept up because removed from temptation."⁴³ Thus Thackeray was associated for Lewes with the discovery of evil in good and with an empirical reduction of virtue to the product of favourable circumstances rather than of conscious moral choice. His treatment of human goodness contrasted unfavourably with that of Dickens: "Dickens has beautifully shown us the union of the noble and the ridiculous;

⁴² Morning Chronicle, 6 March 1843, 3.

⁴³ Ibid.

but in his writings this union is by no means the rule. He has painted so many loveable people that people love him for it."⁴⁴ The Dickensian sympathy with humanity was to be preferred to Thackeray's questioning of all claims to nobility. Yet Lewes had high praise for Thackeray as a realist, declaring that the attribute which most distinguished him from "almost all his contemporaries" was "the strong sense of reality pervading his writing" : "you feel that he is painting 'after nature'"⁴⁵. Drawn to Thackeray because of his fidelity to actual experience, he was unable to accept the full implications of the new realism or to forego the emotional satisfactions which were afforded by Dickens's "loveable people". He wanted realism and love somehow to exist in a single work, and instead found them separated in the persons of Thackeray, the cynic, and of Dickens, the optimist, whom at this time, in view of his later attitudes⁴⁶, he would possibly not have credited with any great faculty for truth to nature, except in those cases where sympathy was stirred by sentiment and pathos.

The only other journal explicitly to compare Dickensian optimism and Thackerayan pessimism at this time was the English Review. Thackeray's view of life, its critic felt, was "harsher" and "sterner" than that of his rival, whose predominant characteristic was "[g]enial sympathy with his fellow-men, and more especially with the pure and lovely, under a homely garb, and wearing the aspect of infantine innocence"⁴⁷. In the scenes dealing with Paul Dombey, Dickens had soared "to a purer ideal" than had been attained by Thackeray⁴⁸, and was in general more poetic : "Mr. Thackeray does not deal much in the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See below pp. 291 - 4.

⁴⁷ English Review, December 1848, x, 272, 268.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 274.

flowers of fancy."⁴⁹ Against these limitations of feeling and imagination on the part of the latter novelist, however, had to be set his greater penetration into the secrets of character. He was "a far more powerful moralist than Dickens; he understands grown men and women better, at least in society: of the poor . . . he has exhibited little cognizance."⁵⁰ Even this praise, therefore, had to be qualified. Thackeray's lesser knowledge of the poor was clearly a symptom of his failure to deal with the more essential aspects of man, those elemental features which were obscured by the conventions of society but which Dickens (and Wordsworth) had revealed in the humble virtues of common life. Admirable as Thackeray's perceptions of human nature were, the fiction of Dickens, since it was "purer" (that favourite Victorian term of commendation), offered greater comfort. Dickens, said this critic, resembled spring, Thackeray autumn. This analogy was not pursued - the writer contenting himself with the observation that both seasons were "good and beautiful"⁵¹ - but plainly spring was the period of freshness and hope (and "infantine innocence"), whereas autumn could only be associated with thoughts of mortality. Dickens concentrated upon the strength of man, Thackeray upon his weakness. At the same time the seasonal imagery might have been taken as an indication that, just as spring and autumn were integral parts of the year's cyclical progress without either of which it was incomplete, so Dickens and Thackeray were organically connected, embodying quite different ideas of life which must yet be united before a total response to human experience was possible. The novelists were not enemies, embattled face to face, but the extremes of the arc described by the pendulum of a

⁴⁹ Ibid., 273.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 274.

clock, through each of which it must pass in order to complete its full swing. They were, as Masson was later to hold, not mutually exclusive but mutually co-existent.

One critic who steadfastly avoided any direct opposition between them, not only in 1848 but always thereafter, was Forster. In the 1850's, he refused to acknowledge that the comparison even existed, making no mention of it in his articles on either author. His only concession occurred in his Dombey review, quoted in the Introduction, and even there, attempting to strangle the contrast at birth, he referred obliquely to novelists "A" and "B". In spite of this, he could never refrain from making various underhand allusions to the differences which existed between the two writers, and his notice of Vanity Fair, while it contained no unfavourable comparison with Dickens, included one with Fielding, who provided a convenient exemplar of Dickensian sympathy. The creator of Tom Jones had been praised in one of Forster's Pickwick reviews for "honouring humanity while he exalted literature", achievements with which, by 1848, the same critic would not have hesitated to credit Dickens, who, as early as 1837, had given promise of following in the earlier master's footsteps and perhaps of outstripping him⁵². Thackeray, on the other hand, in his apprenticeship to the eighteenth century novelist, had not drunk at the major source of his teacher's greatness:

If Mr. Thackeray falls short of Fielding, much of whose peculiar power and more of whose manner he has inherited or studiously acquired, it is because an equal amount of large cordiality has not raised him entirely above the region of the sneering, into that of simple uncontaminated human affection. . . . His is a less comfortable, and on the whole therefore,

⁵² Examiner, 2 July 1837, 422.

let us add, a less true view of society than Fielding's.⁵³

Forster was wedded to the notion that great art should be as "comfortable" as possible, not simply because it was then more pleasant for the reader but also because it was more true to nature. Virtue should be allowed in literature the prominence which it had in life - though what the exact proportion of good to evil ought to be, in order to provide an accurate resemblance between fiction and reality, Forster did not presume to say.

Forster went on to describe Thackeray's distortion of the world around him by a word which had often been flung at Dickens by his detractors: "there is a tendency to caricature, to select in preference grotesque and unpleasing lineaments even where no exaggeration is indulged"⁵⁴. The use of the particular term, "caricature", which was not very often connected with Thackeray, was probably deliberate. Forster was pointing out that the author of Vanity Fair, whom the Times had acclaimed only twelve days before, clearly with Dickens in mind, for avoiding "the fallacy so common to authors, that one isolated quality may, somehow or other, be made to look like a human being"⁵⁵, was himself guilty of a one-sided presentation of reality, since he focussed attention upon the meanness of mankind and took no interest in "simple uncontaminated human affection". Dickens had been accused of emphasising the "grotesque" and the "unpleasing", but Thackeray was no less guilty of ignoring man's higher nature.

It was to Fielding that Forster returned for a final illustration of the limited scope of Vanity Fair. After commenting on the

⁵³ Examiner, 22 July 1848, 468.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Times, 10 July 1848, 8.

"unredeemed selfishness" of even the minor characters, he continued :

We gasp for a more liberal alternation of refreshing breezes of unsophisticated honesty. Fielding, after he has administered a sufficient dose of Blifil's choke-damp, purifies the air by a hearty laugh from Tom Jones. But the stifling ingredients are administered by Mr. Thackeray to excess, without the necessary relief.⁵⁶

The later novelist, Forster implied, would have traced Tom's laugh to some selfish cause, and indeed Thackeray did almost that in a letter to Robert Bell of Fraser's, a few weeks after the Examiner article :

. . . Forster says After a scene with Blifil, the air is cleared by a laugh of Tom Jones - Why Tom Jones in my holding is as big a rogue as Blifil. Before God he is - I mean the man is selfish according to his nature as Blifil according to his. In fact I've a strong impression that we are most of us not fit for - never mind.⁵⁷

In these contrasting passages one of the oppositions between Dickens and Thackeray was clearly outlined. On the one side, there was a determination to uphold the holiness of the heart's affections, and, on the other, a preoccupation with the self-interest underlying all behaviour and an all-pervading sadness at the littleness of man. There was no attempt on the part of Forster, who was entirely committed to Dickensian values, to suggest that truth might lie in a combination of these views rather than in one of them alone. For him, Dickens and Thackeray remained utterly incompatible.

Ostensibly, the critics in this section who condemned Thackeray for painting only the lower portions of human nature were objecting,

⁵⁶ Examiner, 22 July 1848, 468.

⁵⁷ Letters, ii, 424.

like Forster, to his cynicism. Depicting man the socially determined animal, he knew nothing of essential humanity, and his anatomising of character led him to the discovery of evil in apparent goodness and self-interest in every action. His failure to proceed beyond the realm of manners and his sceptical denial of human spiritituality alike placed him on the side of the empiricists. But something further than this perhaps lay beneath the distaste which critics evinced for his philosophy of life. In all probability, it was not from cynicism pure and simple that they turned away but from the mixture of cynicism and sentiment. That this was so is suggested by their irritation at his inability, as Bell phrased it, to "call up a tear without dashing it off with a sarcasm"⁵⁸. In the person of his narrator, Thackeray had dramatised the temperament of his age, creating a persona who shifted uncertainly between sympathy and sarcasm, and this alternation of moods jarred upon the nerves of readers such as Lewes and Forster. His severance of heart and head in the characters of Amelia and Becky respectively was an externalisation of the same clash of opposites. Neither of the two 'heroines' of Vanity Fair, remarked R.S. Rintoul of the Spectator, compensated for the absence of a hero, "since one is without a heart, and the other without a head."⁵⁹ This separation between intellect without emotion and emotion without intellect corresponded to Sterling's between knowledge without belief and belief without knowledge, though almost certainly the "head" which Rintoul desired for Amelia would not have corresponded to that possessed by Becky and the empiricists, but would have represented intelligence working as the judging agent of the conscience rather than as the

⁵⁸ See above, p. 154.

⁵⁹ Spectator, 22 July 1848, xxi, 709.

instigator of a cynical attitude towards mankind. However, Rintoul made no reference to the relevance which the polarity between the two women had to contemporary situations, nor did Lewes or Forster confess that the narrator provided an uncomfortable image of their own unreconciled struggle between faith and doubt. That a dislike for finding mirrored in literature the figure of the half-man (or woman) influenced the reactions of these critics can only be inferred.

Thackeray, like Dickens, spoke to his original readers with two voices, the first, in his case, being considerably muted by the second. The clarity of his style and the quietness of his sentiment showed him to be free from the self-conscious mannerism of his rival, while his characters, for some reviewers, displayed greater truth to life than the grotesque distortions of Dickens. But, as Lewes's reference to the latter novelist's "loveable people" indicated, there were also those who felt that the cynicism of Vanity Fair compared unfavourably with the geniality and loving heart of Dickens. The world of knaves and fools described by Thackeray was itself a distortion of reality, for it did not include the heroism, piety and affection which were so important in the actual world. Purity of style was not matched by purity of outlook.

By the end of 1848, the comparison between Dickens and Thackeray was not yet fully established. Even the opposition on grounds of style had only been obliquely made, and the name of Dickens remaining unmentioned in praise of Thackeray's unassuming manner, while the contrast of optimism and pessimism had hardly emerged at all. There was no sense that the two novelists represented diametrically opposed views of life or styles of fiction, as there was to be in the writings of Masson and other critics of the 50's and 60's. Only with the publication of Pendennis and Copperfield did the antagonism assume a more definite shape.

CHAPTER FOUR

AUTHORITARIAN OPTIMISM:

DICKENS AND THACKERAY, 1850-70 (1).

With the overlapping publication of Copperfield and Pendennis the Dickens-Thackeray comparison advanced from the oblique anonymity of 1848 into the realm of direct statement. Comparative reviews of the two novels in 1851, in conjunction with comments by several other critics between 1850 and 1853, transformed the contrast of outlook and method into a familiar point of reference. The early 1850's were the high-water mark of the contrast, yet, even though the novelists never again issued simultaneously works which so obviously demanded parallel treatment as Pendennis and Copperfield, they continued to be seen as polar opposites throughout the 50's and 60's. In the present chapter the criticism of those decades is considered in terms of antagonism between optimism and pessimism and between objectivity and self-consciousness. In the chapter which follows attention is given to the conflict between realism and idealism, which is shown to be an extension of that between empirical scepticism and faith in human dignity.

(i)

"Why must Mr. Thackeray be always 'going to the fair'? - is a question which will occur to many besides ourselves"¹, wrote Henry F. Chorley of the Athenaeum towards the end of 1850. It was a question which was indeed to be put many times during the remainder of the novelist's career, as critics waited, largely in vain, for some sign

¹ Athenaeum, 7 December 1850, 1273.

that he was forming a higher - and therefore more true - opinion of mankind, and so was capable of travelling on from *Vanity Fair* to the City of Sion. Geraldine Jewsbury, reviewing Lovel the Widower (1860) for the Athenaeum in 1861, bore witness to the fact that in the last years of his life his cynicism had lost none of its power to disturb. She complained that the story contained no elements of generosity or nobility, and objected to being told that there was "nothing better than the worst part of ourselves"².

This persistent emphasis upon the meaner side of life afflicted several of Thackeray's readers with a distress which was sometimes almost physical. He appeared to them in the guise of an anatomist, whose probings of character set nerves jangling and scraped along the bone, sending shivers through the sensitive body of the age. Images of the dissecting table and operating theatre appeared frequently in criticism of his work, recalling the reference to "morbid anatomy" in Bentley's Miscellany of 1848. Thus Chorley spoke disparagingly of his "labours of morbid anatomy"³, J.R. Findlay of the Scotsman in a notice of Pendennis called him "a sort of moral anatomist" who uncovered "the mixed motives and springs of human action"⁴, and Rintoul in the Spectator saw as a feature of his character a "savage delight in anatomising all pretensions to goodness and exploding all motives to action."⁵ Thomas Powell, the author of Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain (1851), likened him to a cold-hearted surgeon who implacably

² Athenaeum, 7 December 1861, 758.

³ Athenaeum, 7 December 1850, 1274.

⁴ Scotsman, 18 December 1850, xxxiv, 3.

⁵ Spectator, 21 December 1850, xxxiii, 1214.

tortured his patients but always sadistically kept them "alive for further operations"⁶, while Charlotte Brontë, in 1852, was repelled by his ghoulish relish for the "relentless dissection of diseased subjects" : "Thackeray likes to dissect an ulcer or an aneurism; he has pleasure in putting his cruel knife or probe into quivering living flesh."⁷ In the Westminster Review, in 1860, Francis Turner Palgrave continued the surgical imagery, referring to the novelist's "anatomical microscope" and his "vivisection" of character⁸, and Walter Bagehot, in his review of Philip (1861 - 62) for the Spectator, wrote of the taste for "minute anatomy" which the book displayed⁹. Even Hippolyte Taine, whose stomach might be expected to have been strengthened by such spectacles as the deathbed of Valérie Marneffe, was sickened by the medical morbidity of the English author's writings; "When we have read to the end of Thackeray, we feel the shudder of a stranger brought before a mattress in the operating-room of a hospital, on the day when moxas are applied or a limb is taken off."¹⁰ Like Carlyle, these critics associated anatomy with disease, finding that Thackeray's habit of taking human nature to pieces forced them to look too closely at the sickness underlying their own apparent state of health. Like the uncle of Froude's Markham Sutherland¹¹, their attribution to another man of a morbid state of consciousness revealed their own morbidly nervous sensibility, which, as the exaggerated language of Charlott Brontë indicated, was excited into "quivering" agony by the

⁶ Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain, p. 104.

⁷ 14 February 1852, The Brontës, (ed. Wise and Symington), iii, 314.

⁸ "W.M. Thackeray as Novelist and Photographer", Westminster Review, October 1860, n.s. xviii, 506.

⁹ Spectator, 9 August 1862, xxxv, 886.

¹⁰ "William Thackeray", Revue des Deux Mondes, 1 January 1857, 2nde période, 173; History of English Literature (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1871), ii, 374.

¹¹ See above, pp. 69 - 70.

voicing of doubts about the dignity of mankind.

One consequence of these explorations into "the secrets of the human prison-house" (A Wordsworthian phrase coined by Nassau Senior of the Edinburgh Review in 1854¹²) was, as Findlay and Rintoul pointed out, a preoccupation with "motives". All human activity, even that which seemed praiseworthy, was exposed as self-interested, and any belief in perfect purity became impossible. Thackeray followed Bentham - though the comparison between the two men was never made - in tracing good to evil sources, rather than Wordsworth in the discovery of a "soul of goodness in things evil". Nor did critics themselves always dispute the truthfulness of his findings - they simply wished that he had preserved silence about them. Findlay declared :

There is much real goodness and beauty, moral and physical, in the world, and it is better sometimes to ignore the fact that such excellence is never altogether pure and perfect - to forget the flaw in the jewel, the fly in the ointment, the Mordecai sitting at the gate.¹³

Chorley was similarly affected:

we must to the utmost urge our objections to such a monotonous crusade against an enemy [Humbug] whose existence every one admits, - to such a ruthless insistence on the blemishes, incompletenesses, and disappointments which canker every human good and happiness.¹⁴

Theodore Martin, in the Westminster Review of 1853, was another who wrote in the same vein :

That no human being is exempt from frailties, we

¹² "Thackeray's Works", Edinburgh Review, January 1854, xcix, 241.

¹³ Scotsman, 18 December 1850, xxxiv, 3.

¹⁴ Athenaeum, 7 December 1850, 1273.

need not be reminded. The "divine Imogen" herself, we daresay, had her faults . . . and we will not undertake to say, that Juliet may not have cost old Capulet a good deal of excusable anxiety. But why dash our admiration by needlessly reminding us of such facts? ¹⁵

Each of these men admitted the accuracy of Thackeray's reading of human nature, but none of them granted his right to make the canker in the rose the leading subject of a fiction. If it was true that darkness lay beneath the light, it was the function of literature to lead men nearer to that light and this could only be accomplished by setting before the reader images of "real goodness and beauty" which would encourage him in the pursuit of perfection.

The qualities in the work of Dickens which stood opposed to the motive-seeking of Thackeray have already been outlined. They were reiterated in two orations on the occasion of his death in 1870 :

By him that veil was rent asunder which parts the various classes of society. Through his genius the rich man . . . was made to see and feel the presence of the Lazarus at his gate He laboured to tell us all, in new, very new, words, the old, old story, that there is, even in the worst a capacity for goodness, a soul worth redeeming, worth reclaiming, worth regenerating. ¹⁶

[His novels were] parables of charity or love; and love is everything in human life, and everything in religion.

"Love is the fulfilling of the law" - there is no commandment greater than love "for God is love". ¹⁷

While Thackeray, it might have been said, rendered the figure of the

¹⁵ "Thackeray's Works", Westminster Review, April 1853, n.s. iii, 374.

¹⁶ A.P. (Dean) Stanley, 19 June 1870, Sermons on Special Occasions (1882), pp. 134 - 5.

¹⁷ J. Panton Ham, Parables of Fiction : A Memorial Discourse on Charles Dickens (1870), p. 16.

beggar at the gate a reminder of the hollowness of the feasting within and thus an image of the vanity of human wishes, Dickens applied all his energies to finding in the lowly and the outcast some remnants of the divine spirit, so assuring all men of their capacity for survival in the midst of adverse circumstances. Working, like the Christian mind whose virtues were extolled by Ruskin, to uncover virtue no matter how dark the den in which she hid herself, he possessed that open loving heart which could not be deceived by fair seeming but saw its own image only where it truly existed. His optimism mirrored the objective presence of God in the world, and endowed his work with a religious purpose. Thackeray, by contrast, saw only the faults that lurked in good. His was "the foul or blunt feeling" described by Ruskin, which found the "God of flies in every alabaster box of precious ointment" (Findlay's "fly in the ointment") and transformed "every virtue" into its opposite vice¹⁸.

If only Thackeray had followed the Dickensian example of love, Forster implied in the early 50's, he would have been a great novelist. Employing his usual policy of issuing oblique statements, the meaning of which would be perfectly clear, Forster informed the public in 1850, when Copperfield was published, that :

There are two modes of regarding the chequered and varied forms of human existence. One man discovers the good that lurks in evil, while the other is labouring to detect the evil that may linger in good. Happily for the world, which has profited so largely by his writings, the better, larger, and wiser part has been chosen by Mr. Dickens¹⁹

Here Forster described Thackeray's methods without openly mentioning him.

¹⁸ See above, pp. 52 - 3.

¹⁹ Examiner, 14 December 1850, 798.

In his review of Esmond, two years later, he adapted the converse tactic of invoking Dickensian values with the same indirectness :

If Mr. Thackeray could but have faith in the hidden spark of the divinity which few men or women lose out of their hearts, if he could see his neighbours really as they are and so describe them, if he could be brought to feel that there is fairer play in finding the good that is in evil things than in dragging out the evil that is in good things - his hold upon a true fame, still for the present doubtful, would be assured and strong.²⁰

Dickens, in Forster's eyes, descended into the darkness in order to throw light into its gloomiest corners, but Thackeray went into the depths only to blacken them further. One depicted the soul's triumph over evil, the other its defeat. One mirrored objectively men "really as they are", the other gave a partial and distorted account of the world around him. Equating optimism with truth, Forster, at one with the public mood of his age, followed the way of intuitive love in preference to that of empirical analysis.

The contrast between Dickens's optimism and Thackeray's pessimism naturally formed an important part of the comparison between them, but other critics did not always find it so easy as Forster to make a simple choice between the two ways of looking at experience. David Masson, for instance, refrained completely from judging their respective merits, reporting the antithesis, with detachment, as a feature of current London conversation :

Go into any circle where literary talk is common . . .
and the same invariable dictum will meet you - that
Dickens is the more genial, cheerful, kindly, and

²⁰ Examiner, 13 November 1852, 723.

sentimental, and Thackeray the more harsh, acrid, pungent, and satirical writer. This is said everywhere. Sometimes the criticism even takes the form of partizanship. We have known amiable persons, and especially ladies, express . . . a positive dislike to [Thackeray] as a writer - grounding this dislike on his evident tendency to fasten on the weaknesses and meannesses, rather than on the stronger and nobler traits, of human nature In print, also, we have seen Mr. Thackeray taken to task for his exclusive preaching of the maxim "Humbug everywhere," and his perpetual exhibition of the skeleton that is in every house.²¹

There were those, added Masson, who preferred such honesty to Dickens's sentimentality, but there could be little doubt "that Mr. Thackeray's partizans" were "fewer in numbers"²². Masson himself cleared the latter novelist from critical charges of cynicism, deciding that the number of rogues and fools in his novels fairly accurately reflected nature²³. He did not, however, claim that Thackeray's view was more true than Dickens's, and in fact he had reasons, which will be given in the following chapter, for wishing to uphold the brighter side of the argument. Even so, he could not deny the validity of Thackeray's scepticism, and was one of the few critics who endeavoured to maintain a balance between the two men.

One of the reviewers against whom Masson defended Thackeray in 1851 was Charles L. Kenney, author of the famous review of The Kickleburys on the Rhine in the Times. In the late 40's, as has been shown, this paper's hostility to Dickens had led it to welcome Vanity Fair with unalloyed enthusiasm, but, by the early 50's, the situation

²¹ "Pendennis and Copperfield : Thackeray and Dickens", North British Review, May 1851, xv, 78 - 9.

²² Ibid., 79.

²³ Ibid., 80.

had changed, Thackeray's persistent cynicism producing a reaction in favour of the man whom in 1848 he had supposedly supplanted. The Times's response to the emphasis which Thackeray placed on man's lack of nobility was most clearly shown in Samuel Phillips's unfavourable 1852 notice of Esmond :

It is fearful to have an insight into the human heart, and to detect in that holy of holies not even one solitary spark of the once pure flame. We live and are supported by the conviction that goodness still prevails in the earth . . . we know and feel that man may yet trust to his fellow man, and that evil is not permitted to outweigh good. A series of novels, based upon the principle which Mr. Thackeray delights to illustrate, would utterly destroy this knowledge and render us a race of unbelievers - animals less happy than the brutes who, dumb and unreasoning as they are, can still consort together and derive some consolation from their companionship.²⁴

Faced with this horrifying vision of evil, mistrust and disharmony, it was as if an associative chord had been struck in Phillips's mind, for, beginning a new paragraph, he followed these remarks immediately with the words already quoted in the Introduction to this work: "To the unreflecting, Thackeray and Dickens represent one school of fiction." This comment did not arise directly out of his previous attack upon the infidel tendencies of Thackeray's outlook, so that clearly the act of writing about the dark qualities of the Vanity Fair world had produced a mental transition to thoughts of their opposites, the goodness, trust and unifying love of Dickens's philosophy. This missing connection between the two paragraphs only emerged later in the course

²⁴ Times, 22 December 1852, 8.

of the general comparison between the novelists which ensued:

Again, Mr. Dickens sympathises deeply with his species, and is never so happy as when dealing with its better qualities. Mr. Thackeray never recognises such qualities, or when he finds them knows not what to do with them.²⁵

This leap from a consideration of Thackeray to the comparison with Dickens perfectly illustrates the claim that thoughts of one novelist bred thoughts of the other.

The Times's contrast between optimism and cynicism was not, however, as clear-cut in favour of Dickens as the passages quoted above would suggest. The first allusion to the existence of such a division of outlooks, in Kenney's review of Thackeray's Kickleburys on the Rhine (1850), certainly revealed a preference for Dickens :

To our own, perhaps unphilosophical, taste the aspirations towards sentimental perfection of another popular author are infinitely preferable to these sardonic divings after the pearl of truth, whose lustre is eclipsed in the display of the diseased oyster.²⁶

But Kenney was praising Dickens here for intentions ("aspirations") rather than achievements. The novelist's belief in goodness sprang from feeling, and was thus superior to cruel sarcasm, but its expression was exaggerated and unreal, as the phrase "sentimental perfection" made plain. If Thackeray's "pearl of truth" was marred by the corruption in which it was embedded and which the unrelenting anatomist insisted on displaying, Dickens's pearl, while more beautifully presented, was nevertheless often artificial. The heart must always take precedence over the head, but

²⁵

Ibid.

²⁶

Times, 3 January 1851, 3.

this did not mean that it was always infallible. That Phillips likewise thought Dickens guilty of sometimes enthusing over sham virtues was apparent from the comparative review of Pendennis and Copperfield which he wrote a few months after Kenney's article :

...Mr. Dickens frequently sins in excess. He contemplates human nature in its strength . . . Mr. Thackeray in its weakness The consequence is, that the former verges on the sentimental, the latter on the cynical, one being the reaction of the other²⁷

The two authors here emerged not simply as opposites but as extremes of a single emotional curve leading from naïve absolute faith in human nature to the disillusionment which resulted when that faith was disappointed - exactly the curve indeed which was described by Thackeray in Pen's progress from gullible infatuation with Emily Fotheringay to worldly-wise flirtation with Blanche Amory. Thus Phillips saw in the polarity not a straightforward choice between right and wrong interpretations of life but twin excesses to be mutually avoided. Though the truth lay more with Dickens than with Thackeray, it did not lie with him completely, for he was liable to be led into admiration of unworthy objects, just as Thackeray was too prone to discredit worthy ones. Truth, if it was not to be found at point exactly halfway between them (as the English Review's spring-autumn analogy might seem to imply), was yet to be discovered at some point between them and not at either pole. Thackeray's picture of human smallness, while it was not endowed with the force of Dickens's portrayal of faith and resignation in the persons of Mr. Peggotty and Ham²⁸, had nevertheless to be taken into account in any total apprehension of mankind.

²⁷ Times, 11 June 1851, 8.

²⁸ See below, p. 264.

This conclusion could also be drawn from the article on Pendennis and Copperfield which appeared a month before in the Prospective Review. The preference which this critic too showed for Dickens²⁹, did not prevent him from saying :

There has been too much sentimentality (though not of a bad case), too much of the melodramatic and unnatural [in the works succeeding Oliver]. If Mr. Thackeray gives us an overdose of selfishness, Mr. Dickens has heretofore treated us to too much Quixotism; and what the former says of women, that they are always sacrificing themselves or somebody for somebody else's sake, is strictly true of too large a proportion of the characters drawn by the latter.³⁰

Later the same reviewer wrote of Dickens's "exclusion of selfishness" as being "over-conscious, and sometimes more far-fetched than Mr. Thackeray's introduction of it."³¹ Both artists inclined to extreme presentations of human conduct, and their views clearly needed balancing one against the other. By using Thackeray's perception of the self-indulgence underlying self-sacrifice in order to correct the sentimental selflessness of Dickens's characters, this critic showed that he responded to the former's realism of assessment. The idea of dubious motives underlying apparently virtuous behaviour had found a place in his consciousness and could not now be erased. Like Phillips, however, he was not inclined to question the integrity of goodness when it manifested itself in the shape of fortitude and endurance, only when he was asked to shed maudlin tears over some spectacle of womanish weakness. As the next section of this chapter will make clear, he demanded from fiction personages of strong moral principle. These he

²⁹ See below, pp. 202 - 3.

³⁰ "David Copperfield and Pendennis", Prospective Review, May 1851, vii, 180.

³¹ Ibid., 182.

found in Copperfield, for all the facility of some of Dickens's sentiment, and not at all in Pendennis.

The contrast between optimism and pessimism continued throughout the 50's and 60's. It was apparent, for instance, in the distinction which critics made between the didactic methods of the two novelists. One of the contributors to a series of eight articles in the British Controversialist of 1858, debating the question "Which is the Abler Writer - Dickens or Thackeray?", was full of praise for the benevolent humour of Dickens and dislike of the talent for "dissection" evidenced by his fellow-novelist³². Dickens, he went on to point out, attempted to win men to virtue "by gentleness and persuasion, by example and by precept", while Thackeray, scourging men for their follies and crimes, chastised imperfect humanity without offering to correct it³³. He saw his task as the negative one of punishment instead of undertaking with Dickens the positive act of reformation. This division of aims was noted by two other critics already quoted in this section. Masson was ready, in accordance with his policy of holding a balance between the authors, to justify both methods, "that of hanging forth before men fine and noble ideals" for their emulation, and "that of punishing them sharply . . . for their actual vices" : "while a writer like Dickens may do good in one way, a writer like Thackeray may do good in another."³⁴ Theodore Martin noted the same difference, also without caring to state a preference : "Dickens seeks to amend the heart by depicting virtue, Thackeray seeks to achieve the same end by exposing vice. Both are great moralists"³⁵. Only Thomas Powell supposed that

³² British Controversialist, July 1858, n.s.vi, 25.

³³ Ibid., 27.

³⁴ North British Review, May 1851, xv, 81.

³⁵ Westminster Review, April 1853, n.s. iii, 371.

both were equally intent on uncovering stupidity and vice, but even he was aware of a divergence in their ways of carrying this out :

both scourge the offender, but [Thackeray] does it from liking the office, and the other because he is angry, and thinks the culprit deserves it Dickens batters his opponent in a passion and gives up when tired : he rails and vituperates all the time, while Thackeray, with more severity, tortures at leisure.³⁶

Though neither author was interested in the depiction of human perfection, Dickens still stood upon the side of emotion, however misguided, and Thackeray on that of intellect. The leading characteristic of the latter was "coolness"³⁷, whereas Dickens was a man of "passion" whose excesses were at least based on "heart and feeling"³⁸, and therefore had the merit of involvement, if nothing more.

The opposition between improvement by love and chastisement by the scourge which Masson and Martin remarked upon was partly responsible for the emergence of a comparison between Dickens the humourist and Thackeray the satirist. The joy of the humourist in the richness of human nature was in sharp contrast to the satirist's concentration on the meannesses and indignities of life. "People, in general, do not like satirists", observed Chambers's Journal in 1856 : "Thackeray . . . is a thousand times less popular than the kindly, genial Dickens, than whom, as an artist, he undoubtedly stands higher." This critic went so far as to call Thackeray "the greatest English novelist", and ridiculed "Miss Fritter" who found him "dreadfully ill-natured" and "Miss Twitter" who was "fond of romance" and could not understand the

³⁶ Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain, p. 104.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

³⁸ Ibid., p.104.

great writer's work³⁹. One of the British Controversialist debaters, on the other hand, perhaps with a touch of irony, awarded the palm to the novelist who coincided with rather than flouted public taste. Dickens, he said, had to be placed first, because humour was more acceptable to "the mass of the English people" than the "exquisite satire of Thackeray", which was not "congenial to their mental tastes and constitutional predilections." The critic himself attempted, like Masson, to hold the two styles of art together as complementary to one another rather than as mutually exclusive : "We generally think of one as supporting the other, and look upon them respectively as the humourist and the satirist, by whose combined influence we are amused and instructed."⁴⁰ Both functions, he thought, were equally important and necessary. The Dublin University Magazine, in 1860, agreed with this, but nevertheless judged Dickens the more important writer of the two. He was "the rarest of all English Humorists", Thackeray "incomparably not one of the greatest Satirists, but the Master Satirist of our generation." The critic concluded : "Admiration for the Humorist and admiration for the Satirist-Humorist of our time, we would simply insist, are in no way incompatible."⁴¹ Though not denying the satirist possible equality with the humourist, the Dublin writer's verdict on Thackeray suggested that a preoccupation with mean subjects was the true cause of his subordination to Dickens.

There was scarcely a single critic who accepted, without reserve, Thackeray's interpretation of life in preference to Dickens's. Even

³⁹ "Mr. Thackeray's Ballads", Chambers's Journal, 2 February 1856, v, 73, 76.

⁴⁰ British Controversialist, November 1858, n.s.vi, 225.

⁴¹ "W.M. Thackeray : Satirist and Humorist", Dublin University Magazine, January 1860, lv, 27 - 8. The description of Dickens was quoted from an article on Bulwer in a previous issue, July 1858, lxi, 49.

Coventry Patmore stressed the more positive side of the former's vision, pointing, in an essay of 1855, to "the great-minded gentleman, Colonel Newcome; the high and sweet lady, the Countess of Florac; the frank and honourable boy Clive"⁴² as examples of nobility. But Patmore differed from many of his contemporaries in the praise he bestowed upon the gloomier aspects of Thackeray's fiction, which, he felt, possessed inexpressible value "for those who really believe in original sin and human imperfectibility."⁴³ The novelist, he wrote, was accused of painting too darkly, but could any reader "candidly say whether, the numbers pre-supposed equal, he knows as many worthy people as Mr. Pendennis . . . pretends to depict [in The Newcomes?]" It would, indeed, be possible to convict the author of under-statement, "were we not convinced that a novelist who should represent the world with its average amount of malice, stupidity, meanness, and vanity, would be absolutely unreadable."⁴⁴ Patmore commended Thackeray also for the ability, which he shared with Fielding and Shakespeare, of forcing his readers to acknowledge their kinship with scoundrels. Dickens's bad people, on the other hand, had no connection with average humanity⁴⁵. Not only did Patmore welcome this revelation of the evil which lurked in all men, and the exposure of human mediocrity and viciousness - he even went so far as to pay tribute to Thackeray's analytical skills :

We are all of us disciples of that school of the new science of moral anatomy, of which Mr. Thackeray is the master; and it is emphatically true of him, as

⁴² "Fielding and Thackeray", North British Review, November 1855, xxiv, 197.

⁴³ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 198.

of all other great writers, that he is only
 "outrunning the age in the direction which it
 is spontaneously taking."⁴⁶

This willingness to associate himself with the more unpleasant implications of Thackeray's works made Patmore the outstanding upholder among Victorian critics of the less flattering of the two novelists. Such pessimism was all the more surprising, even when qualified by glowing references to the virtues embodied in Colonel Newcome and Clive, in that this 1855 essay was contemporaneous with the radiant account of ideal love which he gave in The Angel in the House (1854 - 56), though it should be remembered that the story of Honoria and Felix in that poem was nowhere presented as the rule but rather as an example of exceptional honour and happiness. The publication of this sceptical article on Thackeray between the first and second books of The Angel was nonetheless a symptom of the division in the Victorian mind between belief in unlimited human nobility and doubts based on experience of man's inadequacies. The Colonel was an example of that virtue which could be attained by men, while a Barnes Newcome represented the meanness to which in actuality they so often enslaved themselves.

It was far more normal for those reviewers who wished to praise Thackeray to do so, not, like Patmore, by calling attention to his cynicism, but by attributing to him qualities which made it seem, intentionally or not, that he was cast in the same mould as Dickens. Thus the harsher features of his outlook were minimised. Lewes, for instance, pointed out that he showed "a soul of goodness in things evil, as well as the spot of evil in things good" : "Not a mocking spirit but a loving spirit has he"⁴⁷. Other critics were also quick to weaken the force of his anatomising by pointing out that he was

⁴⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁷ Leader, 21 December 1850, i, 930.

never forgetful of the purer aspects of man's nature. "In the midst of his most brilliant satire," said Theodore Martin, "some simple suggestion of love and goodness occurs, some sweet touch of pathos."⁴⁸ In the same way, W.C. Roscoe, objecting to his "unconquerable hankering to lay his finger on a blot"⁴⁹, in the National Review of 1856, was yet able to congratulate him on the possession of "a heart as deep and kind as ever wrote itself in fiction"⁵⁰. One of the British Controversialist writers, when he declared that Thackeray was "of opinion that life is not so bad as men are apt to describe it"⁵¹, might have been talking of Dickens, as too might the London Quarterly Review in 1864, calling Thackeray a man "of large heart and generous sympathies, who would plead for charity to the fallen"⁵². After Vanity Fair, there was also a tendency to claim that its author, in his latest books, had become, comfortingly, less of a cynic. As early as Pendennis, Lewes discerned "a broader and more generous view of humanity, a larger admixture of goodness with what is evil, and a more loving mellowed tone throughout."⁵³ Forster reserved a similar verdict until five years later, when he perceived that in The Newcomes, for the first time, Thackeray had given himself "an opportunity of showing with how deep a sympathy he can approach all that is good"⁵⁴. But, although each of these critics invoked Dickensian values of "love" and "sympathy" to

⁴⁸ Westminster Review. April 1853, n.s.iii, 376.

⁴⁹ "W.M. Thackeray, Artist and Moralist", National Review, January 1856, ii, 211.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 209.

⁵¹ British Controversialist, July 1858, n.s.vi, 32.

⁵² "Thackeray and Modern Fiction", London Quarterly Review, July 1864, xxi, 387.

⁵³ Leader, 21 December 1850, i, 930.

⁵⁴ Examiner, 1 September 1855, 548.

describe the better features of his rival's work, they did not, with one exception, make any direct reference to Dickens himself.

That exception was Theodore Martin, who explicitly proposed that the brighter aspects of Thackeray's outlook ought to be regarded as arising from the influence of Dickens. According to Martin the gentle spirit of Dickens had exerted a positive effect on Thackeray as early as the mid-40's, when he had exhibited enthusiasm in Fraser's Magazine over the "national benefit" of A Christmas Carol ⁵⁵:

In a writer who felt and wrote thus, it was most strange to find no effort made to link himself to the affections of his readers by some portraiture, calculated to take hold of their hearts, and to be remembered with a feeling of gratitude and love! Whatever Mr. Thackeray's previous experiences may have been, however his faith in human goodness may have been shaken, the very influences which he here recognises of such a writer as Dickens must have taught him how much there is in his fellow-men that is neither weak nor wicked, and how many sunny and hopeful aspects our common life presents to lighten even the saddest heart.

The salutary influence of Dickens's spirit may, indeed, be traced in the writings of Mr. Thackeray about this period, tempering the bitterness of his sarcasm, and suggesting more pleasing views of human nature. ⁵⁶

In 1845, the year following Thackeray's Carol review, Martin had, as has been already seen, shown marked hostility to Dickens, on the score of his lowness, but, after a reading of Thackeray, the optimism of Dickens was thrown into sharper relief, and used as a corrective to

⁵⁵ "A Box of Novels", Fraser's Magazine, February 1844, xxix, 169.

⁵⁶ Westminster Review, April 1853, n.s. iii, 370.

the excesses of his fellow-author, bathing them in a glow of reflected light which softened the cheerlessness of the perpetual refrain of "Vanitas vanitatum". Martin in his following comparisons between the two men, while treating one as the representative of emotion and the other as more given to intellectual analysis, continued to stress the presence of feeling in Thackeray's work, minimising the harshness of his creed: "The mind of the one is as hopeful as it is loving. That of the other, not less loving, though less expansive in its love, is constitutionally unhopeful." Dickens spoke from the heart, while Thackeray, in whom there was "no want of heart", controlled his emotional faculties by "intellectual energy and the habit of reflection"⁵⁷. This anxiety to prove that Thackeray did not lack love emphasised that Martin considered this quality to be of greater importance than intellect. He certainly held no brief for the cynicism of Thackeray's work, as his attempt to prove a conversion by Dickens and his objection to being confronted with the frailties of virtue made apparent⁵⁸, and his impatience with the novelist's gloominess was also in evidence in his claim that Dickens's laughter was "broad and joyous", and that even his pathos left "bright after-hope", but that Thackeray rarely raised more than a smile, while his pathos "too often makes the heart sad to the core, and leaves it so."⁵⁹ On the other hand, there seemed something to be said, after all, for the greater responsibilities which Thackeray placed on his reader's intelligence: "We smile at folly with the one, the other makes us smile, indeed, but he makes us think too"⁶⁰. These

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See above, pp. 174 - 5.

⁵⁹ Westminster Review, 371.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 370.

last two passages expose a conflict in Martin's mind which he was finally unable to reconcile. Having been made to think by Thackeray, he did not relish the "sad" conclusions to which this process led him, and turned back to the instinctive hopes offered him by Dickens. Theoretically, he granted the importance of intellectual inquiry, but in practice he was loath to admit the truthfulness of its less flattering results, and so negated the superiority of mind which Thackeray possessed over Dickens.

Although the basic contrast between the novelists centred upon the opposition of hope and disillusion outlined by Martin there was another area, closely allied, which only Walter Bagehot dealt with. Of as much interest to the Victorian critic as the proper delineation of virtue was the question as to how vice should be treated by the writer of fiction. There was a thin boundary-line between what might be shown to the reader, and to the young person in particular, and what must be at all costs concealed, a line which Dickens had earlier been charged with crossing in Oliver Twist. What Bagehot found disturbing in Thackeray, however, was not that he actually wandered over into the forbidden region but that he constantly threatened to do so. The effect of such titillation upon the Victorian reader was of the same febrile kind as that produced by the practice of morbid anatomy. To lift a corner of the curtain was in some ways worse than to raise it altogether, and Thackeray pruriently tantalising his audience, as in Chapter 64 of Vanity Fair, with glimpses of the mermaid's tail was as uncomfortable as Thackeray exposing the skeleton in every virtuous man's (or worse, woman's) closet. Yet Dickens, while mercifully free from such toyings with the dark undercurrent of life, erred, in Bagehot's opinion, upon the side of discretion :

No one can read Mr. Thackeray's writings without feeling that he is perpetually treading as close as he dare to the border-line that separates the world which may be described in books from the world which it is prohibited so to describe. No one knows better than this accomplished artist where that line is The charge against him is that he knows it but too well; that with an anxious care and a wistful eye he is ever approximating to its edge, and hinting with subtle art how thoroughly he is familiar with and how interesting he could make the interdicted region on the other side Mr. Dickens is chargeable with no such defect: he does not seem to feel the temptation. By what we may fairly call an instinctive purity of genius, he not only observes the conventional rules, but makes excursions into topics which no other novelist could safely handle, and, by a felicitous instinct, deprives them of all impropriety At the same time it is difficult not to believe that this singular insensibility to the temptations to which many of the greatest novelists have succumbed is in some measure connected with his utter inaptitude for delineating the portion of life to which their art is specially inclined. He delineates neither the love-affairs which ought to be nor those which ought not to be.⁶¹

The absence of taint from Dickens's approach to sexual matters in particular was thus ultimately to be ascribed to a total incapacity for portraying passion. It derived from a limitation not a strength. If Dickens and Thackeray represented for Phillips and the Prospective Review unnecessary extremes of sentimentality and cynicism, and for Thomas Powell of passion and coolness, they seemed to Bagehot to stand for excessive innocence and misused experience. In this way Bagehot too, though far from wishing to identify Dickens as the spirit

⁶¹ "Charles Dickens", National Review. October 1858, vii, 478 - 9.

of love incarnate, associated Thackeray with the over-conscious subtleties of a lapsed world in which knowledge of good and evil was put only to perverted use.

By hinting at what lay beyond the proper and disclosing the motives which underlay outward fairness, Thackeray continually jarred upon the nervous sensibilities of his time. He was, said Bagehot, thinking now of his taste for discovering imperfection in all he saw, "an uncomfortable writer"⁶². His obsession with corruption and his questioning of the virtues which other men took for granted focussed Victorian attention on those aspects of existence which were most calculated to excite discontent with the human lot, and made the heart, as W.C. Roscoe complained, "unsatisfied, restless, anxious" : "to drop the curtain and leave the mind jaded with small discontents . . . and saddened with the shortcomings of fruition, - this is to be false to the high and soothing influences of art"⁶³. The pessimism of his work combined the analytical power of science with the sighing unfulfilment of Romanticism, leaving no sure ground beneath the reader's feet.

The only refuge was to claim that the novelist's picture of the world might be true to part of it but certainly not to the part inhabited by the reader. Thackeray's friend, the Rev. Whitwell Elwin, reviewing The Newcomes in 1855, wrote :

People found themselves turned inside out, - their frailties hung as badges about their necks, written upon their backs, pinned upon their sleeves. The natural impulse was to deny the resemblance, and declare the exposure a calumny.

'Fiction holds a double mirror,
One for truth, and one for error :

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"Sterne and Thackeray", National Review, April 1864, xviii, 553.

⁶³

National Review, January 1856, ii, 193.

That looks hideous, fierce and frightful :
 This is flattering and delightful;
 That we throw away as foul,
 Sit by this and dress the soul.⁶⁴

The flattering (Ruskinian) mirror which men chose to hang on their walls in preference to the clear glass which truthfully reflected their crimes and follies may have been intended by Elwin as an image of Dickensian fiction, though there was no explicit indication of this. It was certainly appropriate to the function which his work could serve as a corrective to Thackeray's. Whatever their reservations about his exaggerated methods, for critics such as Phillips and Martin he gave voice to the hopes which they cherished of the human race, and which they preferred as literary themes to the doubts of Thackeray. At the same time, they could never actually "throw away" the fouler mirror, which remained always present to their reluctant gaze. This fact was underlined by the Family Herald in 1868 :

Dickens makes you good-humoured with yourself, because you say, "Goodness gracious, what good people we are!" Thackeray makes you sad, because, although you don't say so, you feel, "Alas! this human heart has sores, and weakness, and wretchedness; it is vile after all."⁶⁵

The Victorians could not forget Thackeray's vision of the world as Vanity Fair, because it was a part of their own consciousness, as was indicated by the passage quoted from Carlyle in the first chapter of this work, on the blindness of the mass of men who "hovered and swam along, in the grand Vanity-Fair of the world"⁶⁶. The Herald's

⁶⁴ Quarterly Review, September 1855, xcvi, 354. Elwin's quotation is untraced.

⁶⁵ "Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray", Family Herald, 24 October 1868, xxvi, 414.

⁶⁶ See above, p.37.

distinction between open utterance and silent thought, like Sterling's between half-saying and half-believing⁶⁷, pointed to a contradiction of public optimism by private pessimism. The fiction of Dickens dramatised for Victorian readers their faith in human perfectibility - though it also revealed undercurrents of human darkness, which many critics found little to their taste - while that of Thackeray brought before them their own suppressed fears. The two could be regarded as mutually exclusive but it would have been more true to say that they corresponded to the two halves of the Victorian mind. "One has most head, the other most heart"⁶⁸, declared Powell, seeing in them the same dichotomy that Rintoul had noted in Becky and Amelia. Head and heart, he might also have recorded, were not separate entities but organic parts of a single body. This anatomical imagery stressed that the clash between instinct, emotion and love on the one hand and experience, intellect and knowledge on the other was not only of an external but also of an internal nature.

⁶⁷ See above, pp. 39 - 40.

⁶⁸ Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain, p. 105.

(ii)

The gloom attributed to Thackeray's fiction would have been more acceptable to many of his critics if, amidst the vices and follies of his *Vanity Fair*, there had been shown some earnest Christian battling with the forces of darkness and winning his way patiently through the snares of the world to the City of Sion. Since the Victorian emphasis on moral purity, so far from being always the product of a facile optimism, often rose directly from a sense of the wickedness of the human heart and its inherent susceptibility to temptation, perfection was presented as a state which could only be achieved with the utmost difficulty and maintained with the greatest courage. Life, as was suggested in the first chapter, was a *Pilgrim's Progress* beset by doubt and danger, and the journey could not be undertaken without a stern guide to point out the pitfalls which attended man's progress at every step. One such guide was the Bible, another was the Church, but the one which was perhaps of most importance was the conscience. The salvation of the individual depended upon his own recognition of the principles of good and evil and upon his possessing the necessary will-power to observe these in his practical conduct. Fiction, in order to be entirely correct in its tendencies, must therefore delineate not only the vanities of man's fallen state, but also the process by which humanity, exerting its moral will, could rise superior to its lower nature. The artist must strengthen his readers' awareness of the obligation imposed upon them to be unflinching in their making of moral choices. It was precisely this strictness of purpose that was lacking both in Thackeray himself and in the mediocre characters he depicted.

This deficiency in his work was pointed out by critics of various

denominations and persuasions. William B. Rands of Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, in 1855, complained that he had no perception of "CONSCIENCE as a supreme, regulating principle in human character"⁶⁹, and Richard Simpson of the Catholic Home and Foreign Review, in 1864, lamented that he possessed no "sovereign principle" helping him "to choose what is true, and to reject what is false and unreasonable"⁷⁰. Dickens, seventeen years before this latter critic, had been similarly minded, accusing his fellow-author of "jesting much too lightly between what was true and what was false, and what he owed to both, and not being sufficiently steady to the former"⁷¹. For Dickens, as for the reviewers, Thackeray was a man who had no fixed values by which to live. This want of decisive moral power was treated at greater length by W.C. Roscoe, who believed that the artist who professed to paint real life must "base his conception on that religious substructure which alone makes it other than shreds of flying dreams". Thackeray, for his part, recognised "the sentiment" but not "the realities" of faith⁷². By this Roscoe meant that while he bowed to the will of God, he possessed in himself no principle which would enable him to maintain his soul intact against the buffetings of fortune. He believed in "God out of the world" rather than in his own breast in the form of the still small voice of conscience, and so he represented man as "tossing on the wild sea, driven to and fro by wind and waves . . . destitute of all knowledge of navigation, and with no port to steer for and no compass to guide his course."⁷³ This type of religion, devoid of any

⁶⁹ "Apropos of Mr. Thackeray", Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, November 1855, xxi, 675.

⁷⁰ "Thackeray", Home and Foreign Review, April 1864, iv, 511.

⁷¹ Letters (Nonesuch ed.), ii, 28.

⁷² National Review, January 1856, ii, 201 - 2.

⁷³ Ibid., 194.

belief in the internal strength of purpose which gave a man courage for "hardened endurance of adverse fate", was little more than fatalism⁷⁴. Unlike the Ulysses of Tennyson - a comparison not made by Roscoe - Thackeray was not "strong in will/To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield", but instead put out to sea without resolve and without a fixed destination. It was undoubtedly this weakness in his approach to life that caused Carlyle, writing to Monckton Milnes a few days after Thackeray's death, to remark that he had had "a big mass of a soul, but not strong in proportion; a beautiful vein of genius lay struggling about in him."⁷⁵ This restless mass of greatness had clearly never found heroic utterance, because it lacked the moral will wherewith to shape itself into positive belief and action.

The lack of moral fibre in the novelist's work was the chief topic of the comparative notice of Pendennis and Copperfield which appeared in the Prospective Review of 1851, where the Carlylean values of work and duty were invoked as the proper corrective to the philosophy of Thackeray and where the outlook of Dickens, though never actually defined, was offered as a counterbalance to that of his rival. This critic took Thackeray to task for his inability to reach a firm conclusion on matters of ethical concern. In dealing with the youthful love affair between Helen Pendennis and Frank Bell, for instance, he was not at all clear in his own mind whether Frank should have married Helen or honoured his engagement to the elderly Martha Coacher, and so he passed the difficulty off with a sneer⁷⁶. To pose a dilemma

⁷⁴ Ibid., 193.

⁷⁵ T. Wemyss Reid, Life, Letters and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes (2 vols., 1890), ii, 113.

⁷⁶ See Pendennis, Ch. viii, Centenary Biographical ed., iii, 98.

in this manner without offering an indication of the correct solution was dangerous, since it raised questions in the reader's mind and left him in a state of irresolution⁷⁷. This demonstrates the desire of the Prospective reviewer for clear-cut moral statements. Later he was to commend Dickens for making his chief personages "men and women powerful for good or evil" rather than beings in whom there was a mixture of qualities⁷⁸. However, the passage which followed this attack on the treatment of the Helen-Frank episode made a point which did not arise directly out of this one isolated incident, except in so far as the critic was still considering Thackeray's failure to ground his fiction on a well-defined moral basis:

Perhaps the chief reason why we call so many of the works of imagination produced in the present day "unhealthy", is the self-consciousness of the beings which they depict. The books called moral, and those called immoral, are alike occupied with the actions, thoughts, and sensations of men and women, who are striving, not to act out their inmost selves, but to determine . . . what their inmost selves would really be about. There is a constant sense attending the reader, of the preponderance of moral sensibility over moral vigour. We admit that fictions of the quality to which we refer, mirror but too truly one phase of our own daily life. They do not mirror the whole of it, or anything like the whole, but in so far as they delineate modern society faithfully, they point to the existence of a morbid weakness of moral fibre, joined to or rather producing, an uncertainty or moral insight. This want of tonicity often cuts

⁷⁷ Prospective Review, May 1851, vii, 176 - 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 182.

off persons of tender conscience from the practical class who do the work of the world.⁷⁹

This constituted a condemnation of the bildungsroman, in which the hero was shown "striving" to discover his "inmost" self. All "self-conscious" seeking for personal identity was to be set aside in favour of active work. Those who stayed too long debating, albeit over their own moral choices, would fall into morbid passivity, unable to reach a decision or perform a task, and shifting continually from one viewpoint to another. The practical man, on the contrary, followed the straight path of duty, never questioning established values.

It was not to the bildungsroman itself, though, that this critic objected, so much as to Thackeray's use of it. If he could have felt, with David Masson, that the author's design had really been "to represent a mind of the thoughtful order, struggling through doubt and error towards certainty and truth"⁸⁰, he would almost certainly have applauded zealously. But it seemed to him that the same failure to work out the moral implications of a situation to a conclusion, which characterised the novelist's approach to the relationship between Pen's mother and Laura's father, was evident in the overall structure of the book. It was a bildungsroman without an ending. So far from arriving at "certainty and truth", the protagonist was drawn in such a way "as to leave the reader without any impression of his having really gained one whit more strength of character at the end of the book than he started with at the beginning."⁸¹ Possibly the critic might have felt that such works as Eustace Conway and Sartor Resartus also charted the wanderings of "moral sensibility" rather than the active but

⁷⁹ Ibid., 177.

⁸⁰ British Novelists and their Styles (1859), p.266.

⁸¹ Prospective Review, 172.

firm-rooted existence of the practical worker. Certainly he could have argued that Arthur Coningsby, no less than Pendennis, was the story of a weak-willed man, one of those whom Carlyle characterised in Sartor as shifting "from enterprise to enterprise, and from side to side", unable ever to pass through doubt and uncertainty to fixed faith⁸². But in the works of Carlyle and Maurice the moral viewpoint was easily definable, not indeterminate and inconsistent as in Thackeray's case, and in Coningsby it was made perfectly clear that an alternative and better way of life lay open to the main character if he chose to take it, whereas Thackeray, also portraying a weakling, had seemed to feel that no such choice of paths was possible, so that the critic felt bound to protest against "the debilitating and disheartening assumption of a weak, nerveless, springless dilettantism, as a normal state which may be deplored indeed, but which can scarcely be avoided."⁸³ The earlier books had preached, either by positive demonstration or negative warning, the necessity for carrying out the task that lay nearest, and it was from the climate of opinion which they had created that the Prospective reviewer drew his own faith in the virtues of practical duty. However, in doing so, he ignored, or at least discounted, the self-consciousness which attended the gospel of work in the writings of Carlyle himself and which was indeed the only means by which modern man, a Meister rather than a Tom Jones, could come to knowledge of himself and his relation to universal law. The disciple was naïve and dogmatic, less open to the full complexity and difficulty of experience than the master.

That this critic would have read with pleasure a bildungsroman

⁸² See above, p. 73.

⁸³ Prospective Review, 172.

with a more heroic protagonist and a more satisfactory ending was made plain elsewhere in his essay. He found particularly offensive the suggestion that Pen's suppression of his passion for Fanny Bolton represented a deterioration from the boyish generosity of his infatuation with the Fotheringay. Thackeray should have recognised that the feelings of a grown man were superior to the illusions of an adolescent, and should have shown his hero leaving undisciplined sensibility behind not for sentimental regrets but for the realities of duty and domestic affection:

The work and struggles of life divert the mind from dwelling on itself, and give occupation and training alike to the intellect and the conscience. The dreamer merges in the man; he first feels the existence of realities (oppressively and painfully enough for some time), and then, as by slow degrees he masters them, he learns that the ideal of life cannot be snatched, must be worked out indeed with the sweat of his brow, but nevertheless has a real existence, and is attainable by the brave and true. Then will his affections, having found out that they need a home as well as a temple, come to discern that the home and the temple are one. Woe betide him if he regrets, and dreams, and plays the poetaster, instead of learning, and working, and battling.⁸⁴

This was the process of education which this reader wished to see delineated in fiction. The standards of this passage were eminently Victorian. The self-forgetfulness of earnest labour and the sweet sanctities of the hearth drove out empty dreams. Man must find his ideal in the actual (a doctrine with which Thackeray himself concurred). It is easy to infer from this why, on the final page of this article, Copperfield, without further explanation, was preferred to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 174 - 5.

Pendennis because its author's view of life was "by far the more complete and the more healthy, and therefore in the highest sense the more true."⁸⁵ Dickens's hard-working hero displayed little tendency towards that morbid self-examination condemned by this critic, and his progress from the dream-temple, *Dora*, to the temple-home, *Agnes*, was exemplary. Externally orientated character development of this kind, ending in the individual's affirmation of the truths which others had found before him, was very different from the tremulous uncertainties of *Pen*, whose creator did not make marriage with *Laura* a satisfactory metaphor for spiritual conversion or final arrival at a scheme of fixed values. Instead of encouraging young men to 'work out' the ideal through the stern realities of life, Thackeray taught them "alternately to weep and to sneer"⁸⁶. This unsettled outlook showed him totally unable to come to terms with the conditions of the world around him, and it was in this, it is to be presumed, that his inferiority to Dickens lay. For this critic he was not primarily a Benthamite motive-seeker, but rather a Romantic who sighed for impossibilities and turned on life with bitter sarcasms when it failed to satisfy his desires. He was the idealist, Dickens the clear-sighted realist.

In the self-conscious search for the "inmost" self and in the placing of dreams before the realities of experience Thackeray showed, this critic might have argued, a tendency towards subjectivism. He substituted for moral absolutes the unhealthy states of mind of weak men, as if the weeping and sneering of thwarted desire and the vacillations of uncommitted dilettantism were the yardsticks by which the universe was to be measured. But Dickens, an upholder for the Prospective Review of objective actuality, was no less tainted, in the eyes of

⁸⁵ Ibid., 191.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 175.

other critics, with the sin of attaching too little importance to moral authority. If Thackeray's characters were too weak for the exercise of conscience those of Dickens were too self-sufficient to feel dependence upon God. The very quality, trust in human nature, which endeared him to his admirers, provided the basis for a charge of irreligion from the famous historian, J.E.E.D. (later Lord) Acton, who argued in 1861 that man himself was the novelist's only deity:

Certain Germans of the last century remind me of him as to religion. They saw 'no divine part of Christianity', but divinified humanity, or humanized religion, and taught that man was perfectible, but childhood perfect. They hated intolerance, exclusiveness, positive religion, and with a comprehensive charity embraced all mankind and condemned alike differences of faith and distinctions of rank, as insurrection against the broad common humanity Surely Dickens is very like them.

He loves his neighbour for his neighbour's sake ⁸⁷

Acton, a Catholic, was not prepared to countenance a secularised religion without Church or God. He believed, as did Maurice and Sterling the Protestants, that man, in addition to the exercise of conscience, must rely upon external aid, not upon his own will, for salvation. Both parties, Protestant and Catholic alike, found Dickens wanting in respect for authority, whether enshrined in God's Church or in inward moral principle. Thus Acton's view was in agreement both with that of the Catholic convert, John Moore Capes, into whose review of Great Expectations for the Rambler the remarks quoted above were inserted by the journal's editor, and with that of the non-

⁸⁷ Letter to Richard Simpson, editor of the Rambler, 8 December 1861, quoted by David Mathew, Acton. The Formative Years (1946), pp. 128-9. Simpson's version of these remarks appeared in the Rambler, January 1862, n.s.vi, 275.

Catholic Family Herald in the same decade. Capes wrote of Dickens's treatment of death :

[His intelligent readers] do not choose to be insulted with the negative sermons of those pathetic death-beds which are made so much happier by the want of all spiritual assistance, and where the "babbling of green fields" is the all-sufficient substitute for the sterner truths of which dying Christians naturally think.⁸⁸

The neglect of Christianity in such scenes by Dickens provided the Family Herald in 1868 with a reason for setting him below Thackeray :

Dickens makes his people die with a jolly satisfaction, secure of being angels, and yet without mention of a Mediator; Thackeray makes the end come awful to the wicked, saddening to the defeated and broken man, who learns, and has learnt, sufficient to distrust himself, and to begin to trust in the goodness of God.⁸⁹

Thackeray's pessimism was plainly held up here as of greater moral service than facile Dickensian optimism, since it led to the confession that man was not self-sufficient. Probably because of this ethical soundness, this critic regarded Vanity Fair as "the greatest novel of the century" and "worth any three of Dickens's best". It should be noted, however, that he was not ready to accept the weakness of the novelist's characters without the imposition upon them of religious standards. His attitude to the self-distrust induced by a reading of Thackeray's works was no less limited by moral considerations than that of the majority of his contemporaries. He was simply more willing than they to derive from the author's writings explicit

⁸⁸ Rambler, January 1862, n.s.vi, 275 - 6.

⁸⁹ Family Herald, 24 October 1868, xxvi, 414.

Christian teachings which provided a reflection of his own beliefs. For other critics, the idea of "trust in the goodness of God", if present at all in Thackeray's outlook, was barely visible, or, as Roscoe alleged, was unsupported by the equally vital element in moral conduct, the conscience.

The remarks of the Family Herald, like those of Patmore quoted in the previous section of this chapter, show that for those who believed "in original sin and human imperfectibility", the religious implications of Thackeray's work were sometimes more wholesome than those of Dickens. To those who inclined towards Catholicism, his philosophy appears on occasion to have been especially acceptable. Patmore, his most pessimistic supporter, was to enter the Roman Church in the 60's. Newman too admired Thackeray, and saw in his death an exemplification "of the text, of which he was so full, Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas". Newman endorsed this text a few lines later : "What a world this is - how wretched they are, who take it for their portion."⁹⁰ In other letters written at the same time, he referred to Thackeray's "drawings" towards Rome⁹¹ (a theory which the available evidence scarcely supports). The attraction of the author of Vanity Fair for the Catholic mind, and the feeling that he had Roman leanings, undoubtedly stemmed from his pessimism. The Catholic reader could infer from his gloomy account of human weakness the necessity for grace, even though this was never stated, but for the Protestant and especially for the Puritan it was often impossible to find satisfaction in a description of man's insufficiency which,

⁹⁰ The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman (ed. C.S. Dessain, 1961-), xx, 566.

⁹¹ Ibid., 569.

while it might afford implicit evidence for his reliance upon God, offered no indication of the need for inner strength of moral purpose, and even seemed to deny that mankind was capable of moral exertion.

One reader who felt that neither Dickens nor Thackeray possessed sufficient religious principle was Ruskin, who saw a reliance upon purely human values, unlike the Family Herald, as characteristic of both novelists, and ignored Thackeray's pessimism entirely. In his catalogue of the types of modern godlessness in the third volume of Modern Painters (1856), the two men represented together a single aspect of the general malady :

our popular authors either set themselves definitely against all religious form, pleading for simple truth and benevolence, (Thackeray, Dickens,) or give themselves up to bitter and fruitless statement of facts, (De Balzac,) or surface-painting, (Scott,) or careless blasphemy, sad or smiling, (Byron, Beranger). 92

Out of all possible manifestations of the contemporary mood, Ruskin thought, Dickens and Thackeray had chosen that variety which stressed the generous impulses of mankind at the expense of religion. Their elevation of human feeling took no more account of God or conscience than did the railings of Byron. It was based on love and kindness, qualities which in themselves were good but which required the support of faith and will to make them truly valuable. As Acton knew, to love one's neighbour for one's neighbour's sake was to allow no part in life to love of the divine spirit.

This absence of a fixed centre of belief, with which the works of both novelists were charged, was reflected, though critics did not seem to realise the fact, in the shape of their novels as well as in the

92 Works, v, 323.

content. Neither had provided their public with that careful structuring of which Tom Jones provided the perfect example. Yet, although nineteenth century critics complained with tedious regularity, from the 30's to the 90's, that first Dickens and then Thackeray could not construct a plot in which every incident assisted the story to its destined conclusion and every character had a function allotted to him as an agent in the unfolding of the narrative, none of them appears to have seen that the abandonment of the Aristotelian completed action was an inevitable consequence of the collapse of Fielding's static world of fixed values. The form of fiction, at least on a conscious level, possessed no metaphysical significance for the Victorian reviewer. Nevertheless, there was a parallel between lamentations over the lack of moral principle in the works of Dickens and Thackeray and complaints that their fiction was without a unifying shape.

The parallel appeared most obviously in what, surprisingly, was almost the only occasion on which Dickens and Thackeray were taken jointly to task for their failure in constructive skill, in the National Review of 1855 :

The influence of Dickens and Thackeray, with their wonderful power of insight into special moods and phases of modern character, has tended to shake the conviction, that any art beyond that of genial and penetrating observation, is needed for the delineation of human life, so as to awaken the deepest interest of perusing man A character is casually taken, and set up in various casual lights, and turned about, and put in different positions, and socially strained, and inquisitively tapped, and generally put through its paces; and the same thing is done for several other characters, and the

aggregate is called a novel In the tale - the action - lies the proper fusing power for the individual elements; and if these elements have been originally separate studies, no power on earth will successfully group them, so as to bring out all the intended characteristics of each The neglect of the plot until after the characters have been determined and surveyed, is as fatal as the neglect of statuary grouping till after the individual figures have been modelled. ⁹³

The subordination of structure to character - often pointed out by reviewers of Thackeray in particular⁹⁴ - was a reversal of the natural order, matching in formal terms the change in emphasis from the divine to the secular. The traditional notion of a plot with beginning, middle and end, in which each character played his part in a pre-existent series of events, provided a literary equivalent to the Christian universe in which the individual was subjugated to a pre-determined historical course running from the Creation to the Judgement. A novel without narrative backbone, like a world no longer controlled by God and lacking the assurance that human history was happily completed in the divine mind before it had even commenced, broke down into a chaotic heap of individual beings each of whom was of equal value. Just as in the landscapes of the Pre-Raphaelites "ears of corn and blades of grass" were transformed into separate centres of interest, so, complained Justin McCarthy, the Irish historian and novelist, in 1864, every character in the

⁹³ "A Novel or Two", National Review, October 1855, i, 337.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., Dublin University Magazine, August 1851, xxxviii, 194; James Hannay, Leader, 8 September 1855, vi, 870, and Broadway, September 1868, n.s.i, 41 ; The Month, June 1869, x, 518.

novels of Dickens became an epic in himself⁹⁵. Without plot the universe dissolved into atomism, subjective "moods and phases" of personality usurping the place of objective truth.

Neither Dickens nor Thackeray could fully satisfy the demand for an interpretation of life founded on authoritarian premises. The comparison between optimism and pessimism did not extend into one between strength of principle and moral indecisiveness, except in the undeveloped opposition of the Prospective Review. Their novels presented a world from which not only God but also conscience had been exiled. Thackeray depicted the individual searching restlessly for identity without fixity of purpose or firmness of will. Dickens made mankind his god and set kindly benevolence in place of religious faith. But unwittingly, some critics had themselves accepted the replacement of God by man. The deity which they worshipped was either the inward voice which delivered judgements on good and evil, or, in the case of the Prospective Review, the laws of everyday existence to which man must conform. Any mystic sense of Acton's "divine part of Christianity" - or even of Carlyle's cosmic "Necessity" - was missing from authoritarianism of this kind. Though critics would not have admitted it, God in his heaven had, for them, as for the novelists they attacked, given way to man on earth.

(111)

Another consequence to fiction of the disappearance of divine control was that the personality of the author himself (or of a narrator between whom and the novelist the Victorian critic drew no

⁹⁵ "Modern Novelists : Charles Dickens", Westminster Review, October 1864, n.s.xxvi, 426.

distinction) became of more central importance. He became the ordering divinity of the novel, imposing his own meaning upon disparate experience, or, less exaltedly, the showman, whose display was no less, and might be more, of himself than of the puppets whose wires he manipulated.

In the work of Dickens the most obvious means by which, for Victorian reviewers, the novelist intruded his own personality on external reality was, as has already been shown, his strongly-marked style. This aspect of his fiction continued to be remarked upon in the 50's and 60's. Fraser's Magazine, in its obituary notice of 1870, commented :

As to his literary style, that was his own - striking, brilliant, not seldom odd, sometimes awkward, yet even then with its own sort of tact. He was artful and skillful, but never attained, and never seems to have sought to attain, the kind of art which conceals itself; a certain care and elaboration were never absent; he took his aim carefully (he was in dress and in every other respect the opposite of a negligent man) and usually hit the mark.⁹⁶

Not all critics were as lenient as this in their appraisal. Even here there was a suggestion that Dickens's "elaboration" of style, being linked to his showiness of dress, was the mark of a man whose social standing was not quite of the best. Elsewhere, this self-conscious ostentation, contrasting unfavourably with the gentlemanly purity of Thackeray's language, excited the same distaste which it had aroused in the 40's. The ideal art was still, as Fraser's indicated, that which concealed itself. "In the one", said a British Controversialist writer, distinguishing between Dickens and Thackeray, "a striving after

⁹⁶ "Charles Dickens", Fraser's Magazine, July 1870, n.s. ii, 133.

effect is visible in almost every page; in the other, the style is easy, pure, natural, and unaffected."⁹⁷ Samuel Phillips, in 1852, agreed. Whatever the faults of Thackeray's philosophy, he admitted in his notice of Esmond, it was presented without "factitious adornment", whereas the manner of Dickens betrayed "effort and constant straining for effect."⁹⁸ Theodore Martin drew the same comparison in the following year. Dickens's style, which had once been "lucid", was now "vicious, affected, and obscure", but Thackeray's was always "manly and transparent, presenting his idea in the very fittest garb."⁹⁹ Such compliments to Thackeray on his clarity of expression were rather empty, since both Phillips and Martin objected to his view of life. To divorce style from content, as these critics must often have done, was a pointless exercise. By contrast, their hostility to Dickens's style went hand in hand with dislike of his material. Phillips, in the course of his Esmond review, objected to the monstrosities painted by Dickens "in his more recent productions"¹⁰⁰, and Martin mentioned that "especially of late" Dickens had been preoccupied with the "fantastic and unnatural"¹⁰¹. Both critics clearly had in mind the characters of Bleak House (1852 - 53), which was being serialised at the time they wrote. Their responses to the grotesqueries of this novel were inseparable from their accusations of distortion in the style. Once again, the objection to Dickensian mannerism was as much the result of a concern with matter as of a reaction to manner.

⁹⁷ British Controversialist, August 1858, n.s. vi, 71.

⁹⁸ Times, 22 December 1852, 8.

⁹⁹ Westminster Review, April 1853, n.s. iii, 370.

¹⁰⁰ See below, p. 264.

¹⁰¹ See below, p. 256.

The distinction between Dickensian self-indulgence and Thackerayan purity seemed to be accepted, in 1851, by David Masson, who remarked: "in Mr. Dickens's sentences there is a leafiness, a tendency to words and images, for their own sake; whereas in Mr. Thackeray's one sees the stem and outline of the thought better."¹⁰² In Copperfield, however, Masson added, Dickens had indulged in "fewer of those recurring tricks of expression, the dead remnants of former felicities, which constituted what was called his mannerism."¹⁰³ By 1859, these old offences had been forgotten, and Masson, in his British Novelists and their Styles, was eager to find in the forcefulness of Dickens's appeal to the feelings adequate atonement for any technical deficiencies :

There is an Horatian strictness and strength in Thackeray which satisfies the most cultivated taste and wins the respect of the severest critic; but Dickens, if he is the more rapid and careless on the whole, seems more susceptible to passion, and rises to a keener and wilder song.¹⁰⁴

Unlike Martin and Phillips, Masson attempted to reconcile Dickens's style with his power to move the human heart. This he could only accomplish by dropping the charge of mannerism, with its implication of insincerity, for one of carelessness, which involved the very opposite fault of neglecting manner under the uncontrollable sway of spontaneous emotion.

To Martin, again reiterating one of the comparisons of 1848, a great deal of the "passion" admired by Masson was marred by the same qualities which disfigured Dickens's style, and was far from genuine.

¹⁰² North British Review, May 1851, xv, 62.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰⁴ British Novelists and their Styles, p.240.

Dickens's pathos, he thought, though "first class" at its best, was "frequently far-fetched and pitched in an unnatural key . . . elaborated by the artifices of the practised writer", but Thackeray's was "unforced" and went "to the roots of the heart."¹⁰⁵ This opinion on the respective sincerity of the two authors was shared by Richard Holt Hutton of the Spectator, who declared in 1869 that no other writer's genius was "so utterly devoid of passion" as Dickens's, "so almost certain to be theatrical and falsetto in its tone whenever it attempts passion". The power of his melodrama derived from "consciously adding stroke after stroke to the desired effect", and even his humour was without feeling, unlike that of Carlyle and Thackeray, which seemed to register "the highest wave of scorn or pity in their nature."¹⁰⁶ Hutton, like Martin, saw a distinction between the artificer, who insisted upon intruding his own skills upon the public, and the artist, in whose work technique was concealed and subordinated to true emotion. Dickens reduced passion to mere stage-gesture, designed to impress a susceptible audience. Thackeray and Carlyle, whose attitudes were natural not manufactured, were guilty of no such playing to the public. But, intentionally or not, Hutton was emphasising the expressive aspect of Thackeray's fiction- the "scorn or pity" for which it was a vehicle - rather than its objective reflection of life, and so the author, less obtrusively than Dickens, remained at the centre of the novel.

The theatrical self-display which Hutton discerned in Dickens's writings also produced a hostile reaction from Ruskin, for whom, in 1870, the novelist "was essentially a stage manager, and used everything for

¹⁰⁵ Westminster Review, April 1853, n.s. iii, 370. But cf. Martin's very different assessment of the novelists' pathos, at p.190 above.

¹⁰⁶ "Mr. Dickens's Moral Services to Literature", Spectator, 17 April 1869. xlii, 475.

effect on the pit"¹⁰⁷. This was in accord with Ruskin's earlier remarks of 1841. In spite of much admiration for Dickens, he believed that, like those of the Dutch genre painters, his productions were too frequently intended to throw into prominence the talents of the artist rather than the truths of the scene or person depicted. Ruskin continued to condemn Dickens as a mannerist, but Thackeray, at least on one occasion, he regarded in a different light. In 1884, he was to dismiss the contrast at the end of Chapter 32 of Vanity Fair, between Amelia praying for George and George lying dead on the field of Waterloo, as "blasphemy of the most fatal and subtle kind"¹⁰⁸, presumably because it cast doubt on the efficacy of prayer, but in 1856 his reaction to the same passage was a favourable one :

A great deal might have been said about it. The writer is very sorry for Amelia, neither does he want faith in prayer. He knows as well as any of us that prayer must be answered in some sort; but those are the facts. The man and woman sixteen miles apart - one on her knees on the floor, the other on his face in the clay. So much love in her heart, so much lead in his. Make what you can of it.¹⁰⁹

This often-quoted commentary from the third volume of Modern Painters can only be understood in context. It occurred in the midst of Ruskin's attack, from which excerpts were quoted in the first chapter of this work, on the German notion that things existed not in themselves but in the mind of man, and on the Romantic application of this theory through the pathetic fallacy. Ruskin was commending Thackeray for his freedom from such egocentric interference with objective "facts" and his willingness to stand between reader and action only in the rôle of a transparent glass. No comparison was made with Dickens, but the qualities praised

¹⁰⁷ Works, xxxvii, 7.

¹⁰⁸ The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century (1884), Works, xxiv, 72.

¹⁰⁹ MS. note to Modern Painters, iii, Works, v, 213n.

in the famous conclusion to the Waterloo chapter were exactly those which Ruskin always missed from the work of Thackeray's rival - humility and self-effacement.

Thackeray, however, was by no means a standard of objectivity for his contemporaries. Roscoe, who believed him to be of all living novelists the least self-conscious, could not grant him total immunity from subjectivity :

All artists have an ultimate aim which shapes their working. Miss Brontë wishes to depict marked character; Dickens bends himself to elicit the humorous element in things; Bulwer supposes that he has a philosophy to develop; Disraeli sets himself to be himself admired. Thackeray only desires to be a mirror, to give a true but a brilliant reflection; his vision is warped, no doubt, by peculiarities of his own, but his aim is to reproduce the world as he sees it.¹¹⁰

The warping of Thackeray's glass plainly derived from that "unconquerable hankering to lay his finger on a blot" which Roscoe, in the same article, saw as his besetting sin; Dickens's search for strange points of humorous interest and Thackeray's for impurity of motive both resulted in the personal outlook of the artist influencing the presentation of external reality (though it was Disraeli whom Roscoe credited with simple self-display). But in the main, Roscoe thought, Thackeray's aim, unlike that of Dickens or of any other contemporary novelist, was to mirror the world around him. This mirror-image, however, Roscoe seemed to qualify in his final sentence, by the phrase "as he sees it", which argued that Thackeray's reflection of external reality was, even at its most objective, affected by his personal idiosyncrasies, and perhaps also that no realistic artist could totally

escape the limitations of his individuality. This latter interpretation is suggested by the fact that the words, "his aim is to reproduce the world as he sees it", apparently constituted a definition of the purpose of realistic literature in general, as well as of Thackeray's in particular, and referred to a subjectivism different to that contained in the preceding phrase, "peculiarities of his own". Whether consciously or not, Roscoe was conceding that absolute realities could not be realised by art, and that no two pairs of eyes saw human existence in exactly the same way, though there were clearly greater and lesser degrees of objectivity to which a writer might attain.

Dickens's intrusiveness manifested itself, Victorian critics believed, in unnecessary tricks of style and contrived emotional displays, and, as Roscoe indicated, in the discovery of oddity in familiar things where often none existed. The supposition was still that he was a mannerist rather than a writer who expressed a personal vision of life. Thackeray, on the contrary, was sometimes regarded as a novelist who interpreted the world from his own individual point of view, and even one who cast humanity in his own image. This subjective approach was justified by Septimus Berdmore of the Westminster Review in 1864 :

that man [Thackeray] is, in our eyes, greater who digs in his own heart for less beautiful traits of human nature, and is not afraid to expose the weaknesses he himself has felt, than the writer who gives us airy romance and fictitious sentiment, slurring over the desolate hovels of habit and custom in which we live, together with himself : one is material and honest, the other imaginative - perhaps honest also, but still more fond of exhibiting the beautiful produce of the brain than the said, sad ugly picture which his own heart would afford.¹¹¹

This was a contrast not between objective and subjective types of art,

¹¹¹ "Thackeray", Westminster Review, July 1864, n.s. xxvi, 181.

but between two modes of subjectivity, that which ignored reality in pursuit of a realm of fantasy created by the imagination of the artist and that which extracted general truths from its own experiences and feelings, finding in the individual a type of the universal. The self-analysis practiced by Thackeray, and approved by this critic, was clearly a contradiction of the aesthetic propounded by Carlyle and Ruskin, since the "weaknesses" of the conscious and introspective observer were allowed to colour external reality. It had the support of Sterling's contention that self-examination was a means of gaining knowledge of one's fellow-men, though Sterling, opposing "the wrinkles and paleness" of the face in the mirror to the "fresh and glowing . . . natural vision" outside the window, would perhaps have disagreed with Thackeray's tendency, praised by Berdmore, to identify the "sad ugly picture" of his own heart with human nature as a whole.

To the eyes of Forster, Thackeray's self-consciousness presented itself in a very different guise from that in which it appeared to Berdmore. The novelist's attitude, he thought, so far from being one of sympathetic comprehension based on self-knowledge, was that of the detached and egocentric showman. While the Westminster critic, in his glance at the writer of "airy romance and fictitious sentiment", quite possibly had Dickens in mind, Forster in his notice of Esmond, was certainly upholding Dickensian standards :

The truth is that Mr. Thackeray hangs over the fictitious people on his paper too much as their creator and their judge. He does not think his own way in among them and talk of them as a man should talk of men. If they be men and women, he must be the God who judges them; if he be a man, they must be puppets. In every case they lie without him and beneath him. There is not a character in Esmond, not the most spotless, over which we do not constantly feel that Mr. Thackeray is

bending with a smile of pity . . . exhibiting to us something adorable, that he may aggravate our perception in it of something detestable . . . producing for his own satisfaction, in a word, mere distortions and unnatural defects, - all because the wires are held by him, and it is his sovereign will and pleasure to show the working of his men and women thoroughly.¹¹²

The charge that Thackeray had reduced his creations to the status of puppets would, in the hands of later critics, constitute (supposedly) a purely artistic objection, based on interference with the autonomy of character. In Forster's review, the accusation was a moral one. Thackeray's insistence on playing God was directly linked to his analytical exposure of "detestable" evil in "adorable" good. Ultimately, Forster was more interested in refuting Thackeray's pessimism than in the question of subjectivity. He accused the novelist of intrusiveness only because he disagreed with the impression of man given in his books. Just as opponents of Dickens minimised the effect of his grotesquerie by claiming that he was a mannerist endlessly repeating the same tricks of style and observation, and deforming reality in order to produce an impression on his public, Forster attempted to believe that the scepticism of Thackeray sprang not from genuine conviction but rather from a desire to prove his own superiority by the production of distorted images of humanity. What precise "satisfaction" was to be obtained from this manipulation of figures bearing little resemblance to the realities of flesh and blood, Forster did not seem able to suggest.

Though espousing the Ruskinian-Carlylean ideals of love and sympathy, which he found fulfilled in the works of Dickens, Forster did not claim that Thackeray treated mankind, as Ruskin's man of "foul or blunt feeling" did, as a monstrous reflection of his own diseased

¹¹² Examiner, 13 November 1852, 724.

consciousness. In his notice of Bleak House a year later, on the other hand, he came nearer to envisaging such a self-centred interpreter of human life :

[Dickens's] main strength has lain in the ability to concentrate his thoughts on objects external to himself. If his mere personality were at every turn set up as the limit and bound to his perceptions, if it were still his recurring habit to take his own character as the infallible test of all other characters, he would in each fresh essay be always retracing only the old weary ground. But ready and eager at all times, with genial warmth and fulness, to enter in all the peculiarities of others, we have him continually throughout his books apprehending and interpreting new forms of character and truth . . . his genius is his fellow-feeling with his race.¹¹³

The task of sympathetic identification with other human souls, neglected by Thackeray, was achieved by Dickens, who completely subdued his own personality to his material. It is tempting to see in the remarks above another oblique comparison between the two novelists, particularly as they followed almost immediately upon some in which a contrast plainly was intended¹¹⁴. The entire passage quoted here was an unacknowledged rearrangement of part of an article on Dickens contributed to the North American Review by Edwin Percy Whipple in 1849¹¹⁵, but this does not necessarily invalidate the idea of a comparison, since Forster may have seen in the American critic's words an applicability beyond that of their original context. The main stumbling-block to supposing that Forster had Thackeray in mind would rather be that there was in fact a difference between the type of self-consciousness described in this second article and that attributed to Thackeray in the first a year

¹¹³ Examiner, 8 October 1853, 644.

¹¹⁴ See below, pp. 250 - 1.

¹¹⁵ "Novels and Novelists : Charles Dickens", North American Review, October 1849, lxi, 394-5; rptd. in Whipple's Literature and Life (1851), p.31.

before. The hypothetical writer in the Bleak House review made his own character the measure by which the rest of his species was to be judged, whereas Thackeray, in the Esmond notice, set himself apart from his fellows, dissecting them with no hint that their errors were also his. Forster, as had been said, made no equation between Thackeray's distortions of human nature and morbid introspection. Nevertheless, an unstated distinction did emerge from these two articles, between the narrow inward-looking mentality of Thackeray, whose "own personality" was "set up as the limit and bound to his perceptions", in whatever fashion, and the rich humanitarianism of Dickens, whose art was always externally orientated.

Roscoe, Berdmore and Forster, in describing the types of self-consciousness which they variously ascribed to Thackeray, made no use of the term "subjective". Only Richard Simpson, in the Home and Foreign Review of 1864, specifically classified Thackeray's art in this manner, on the grounds that the novelist allowed the peculiarities of his personal theories to intrude between the reality of a character and his audience. In Esmond, Simpson alleged, there were two Beatrices, one the "delightful vision" of the narrative, the true Beatrix, the other an "attendant wraith" who figured in the authorial commentary as a peg on which Thackeray was able to hang his favourite notion of the viciousness of intelligent women. The two halves of this character clearly represented the two kinds of art which Simpson went on to distinguish, the "objective self-developing" which employed a "dramatic method" and the "subjective theoretic" which favoured a "descriptive method"¹¹⁶.

Subjectivity, as defined here, referred to the advancement of individual ideas which were disproved by the facts of life itself, but elsewhere in

¹¹⁶ "Thackeray", Home and Foreign Review, April 1864, iv, 495.

the same essay Thackeray was also discussed as an example of the author whose characters were merely reflections of himself, "confessions and exhibitions of his own inner world" :

In Mr. Dickens we do not see a man who even pretends to offer us his heart to read, or who identifies his characters with himself, as Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton does. We delight in his stories, but we care nothing for him, except as a productive national property. But in Thackeray we see a man who cannot help telling us of himself, and who disdains to give us a false picture; who draws from his own image in a mirror; who does not know how to separate himself from his own creations, or to leave them to stand alone.¹¹⁷

Simpson would presumably have considered Dickens's work "objective" and "dramatic", since his personages were at least allowed to be individuals in their own right. He made no attempt to interfere with the life he depicted, while Thackeray's characters had no existence apart from their creator (a supposition called into doubt by Simpson's own testimony to the vivid reality of Beatrix).

Superficially, the distinction which this critic drew between "dramatic" and "descriptive" fiction anticipated the belief of post-Jamesian writers such as Percy Lubbock that the artist must dramatise more than he must relate and that Thackeray's novels were flawed by the intrusion of the author in his own person, interfering with the autonomy of character. Essentially, however, the attitudes of 1864 and those of 1921 were far apart. Lubbock objected to Thackeray's commentary on aesthetic grounds alone. Simpson's reason for attacking it, on the other hand, was purely moral. He disliked Thackeray's insistence on the foolishness of good women and the immorality of intelligent ones, feeling that virtue and intellect (in the sense of

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 476 - 7.

strength of moral principle) ought to be shown as sometimes co-existent. Like Roscoe and Forster, he associated subjectivism with absence of sympathy for the nobler aspects of man's existence. Only when Thackeray was deemed to have underestimated human capacities was he accused of being overly self-conscious, just as, it has been suggested, Dickens was called a mannerist, very often, not because of distaste for his manner so much as because of dislike for his grotesque matter. Ruskin and Carlyle supposed that the artist who in any way drew "from his own image in a mirror", or obtruded his personal skills on his audience, was guilty of a moral sin, and this was the verdict of Victorian reviewers of Dickens and Thackeray also. They were incapable of conceiving a subjective literature which was not a belittlement of human spirituality, and therefore self-consciousness, of whatever type, was for them ethically 'wrong', and objectivity necessarily 'right'. Whatever did not coincide with pre-existent notions of human nature, based on faith in man's perfectibility, constituted a threat to divine authority and could only be interpreted as proceeding from egotism.

Few critics, however, showed any interest at all in the question of subjectivity, even within the moral limitations observed by Simpson, Forster and Roscoe. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the almost complete neglect of the problems raised by Thackeray's allegedly authorial intrusions. Although Simpson raised the matter of their interfering with the autonomy of character, other reviewers scarcely seemed to observe their existence. The Saturday Review, for instance, in 1862, contented itself with remarking simply that Thackeray's constant sermonising was a "padding" device, employed to eke out into a full-length novel the limited material afforded him by the conventions

of London society¹¹⁸. William Mackay, in the New Monthly Magazine of 1870, suggested, like Simpson, that the novelist's "preaching" passages invited the reader to form a lower opinion of his characters than was warranted by their narrative appearances, but he then naively shelved all further consideration of this subject, by declaring that, in the case of a writer so great as Thackeray, it would be impertinent and irreverent to condemn his methods¹¹⁹. A year earlier the same critic had voiced an important query : "The great enigma to solve with reference to Thackeray's writings is this : how he contrived, in spite of these constantly recurring moralisings . . . to leave us works so artistically perfect."¹²⁰ Yet, having made the point, Mackay made no attempt to discuss it further. Neither he nor the Saturday Review came to close grips with Thackeray's discursive technique. They discussed his commentaries only in terms of their digressiveness, as an obstacle which impeded the flow of the narrative not as a form of self-consciousness.

One reason for this surprising lack of interest in what for many later critics, from the 1890's onwards, constituted perhaps the most important feature of Thackeray's art, may have been the familiarity of the average nineteenth century reviewer with the narrative methods of Fielding, which gave the sanction of novelistic tradition to the presence of the supposed author in his work. But perhaps the most immediate reason was precisely that moral bias which may be discerned in the reactions of those readers, Roscoe, Forster and Simpson, who did concern themselves, in various ways, with Thackeray as a subjective artist. Each of these critics associated self-consciousness with

¹¹⁸ Saturday Review, 23 August 1862, xiv, 224.

¹¹⁹ "Thackeray's Later Manner", New Monthly Magazine, May 1870, cxlvi, 580-4.

¹²⁰ "Thackeray and Sterne", New Monthly Magazine, December 1869, cxlv, 629.

cynicism, and revealed themselves more eager to refute the low account of man contained in Thackeray's sermons than to enter into considerations of the relationship in art between the mind of the creator, the object created, and the external world of reality. Similarly, attention was diverted away from the fact that Thackeray apparently spoke so often in his own person (no distinction being made in Victorian criticism between the author and an impersonal dramatised first-person narrator) towards the outlook on life which his addresses to the audience expressed. It was again his pessimism which was at fault. As E.S. Dallas, of the Times, remarked in 1862, his preaching had generally been condemned on grounds of morality. Dallas himself felt that the charge of cynicism was, by the 1860's, seen to be unwarranted, and that the charge should rather be that these intrusions held up the progress of the story and were too much of one kind ¹²¹. Even he, however, was perhaps finding an artistic justification for objections to Thackeray's work which still at the roots were moral. His claim of monotony was only another manner of stating, as so many of his predecessors had done, that he did not wish to be continually reminded of the vanity of all earthly endeavour.

In this almost total neglect of Thackeray's discursive methods, the subordination of the issue of subjectivism to morality is most plain. Critics were more concerned with the novelist's scepticism than with his egotism, and on the very few occasions when he was seen as in some way a self-conscious writer the true cause of complaint was the unflattering picture he provided of human nature. Though plainly there was a small measure of awareness that the personality

¹²¹ Times, 5 December 1862, 6.

of the novelist himself, in the work of both Dickens and Thackeray, was possessed of an importance not felt in the fiction of Scott, Jane Austen or even Fielding, there was not only no sense of the concepts of subjective autonomy employed in the twentieth century, but little use even of the theories of self-consciousness and artistic impersonality to be found in the aesthetic of Carlyle and Ruskin. The antagonism of humility and egotism was at its most obvious in the opposition of Thackeray's purity of style to Dickensian mannerism, but elsewhere it was all but buried in the wider conflict of optimism and pessimism, with which, in the writings of Carlyle and Ruskin, it had been inseparably linked, but of which it had nevertheless still formed a distinguishable part. The moral bias of Victorianism, always to the fore in the teachings of its prophets, was in yet greater evidence in the criticism of the period, where all the problems arising from German transcendentalism and Romantic self-consciousness were often unrecognised and never debated in full.

The accusations of subjectivity levelled at Thackeray in the 50's and 60's were therefore entirely part of the division between optimism and pessimism outlined in the opening section of this chapter. The objective novelist was he who manifested sympathy towards mankind and encouraged his fellows in the pursuit of perfection, the subjective was the cynic who distorted human nature by concentrating upon its lower features. This contrast of hope and scepticism was the continuous thread which ran through the Dickens - Thackeray comparison, forming a counterpart in terms of the novel to that strife between faith and

science, reason and understanding, which played so important a rôle in nineteenth century experience. As weak-willed dilettante (in the Prospective Review), sneering Mephistopheles and cold-hearted anatomiser of men's conduct, Thackeray stood opposed to the moral earnestness and attempted belief in human perfectibility of the majority of his contemporaries. To Forster, he exemplified the motive-seeking tendencies, leading to the discovery of evil in good, which (though the parallel was not drawn) the early Victorians associated with Benthamism, while Dickens, like the Christian mind hymned by Ruskin, lovingly sought out the good that lingered even in evil. Samuel Phillips also, with less certainty than Forster, preferred the voice of feeling to the probings of the analyst, Theodore Martin did his best to re-cast Thackeray in the mould of Dickensian hopefulness, softening the harsher aspects of his creed as much as was possible, and even Thomas Powell, though far from identifying Dickens with the spirit of humanity, nevertheless found in his books more genuine emotion than in the surgical dissection carried out by Thackeray. In the Prospective Review more emphasis was placed on the mental restlessness of the latter's fiction than on its scientific qualities, but the difference between the two novelists was still between acceptance of established values - work and domesticity - and self-conscious analysis, since this critic associated Pendennis with the morbid introspection and irresolution of the age. On those occasions when Dickens himself was regarded as offending against authority, then Thackeray might be preferred, as he was for possessing a style whose purity contrasted favourably with his rival's mannerism, or for painting characters who were not too self-sufficient to depend upon divine aid. But, on the very important count of trust in human nature, so important to the larger proportion of his critics, he failed

to offer any support to the public opinions of the age, while he mirrored only too faithfully its private fears. For this reason, whatever reservations reviewers might have about Dickens's religious principles or about the darker and more grotesque elements of his fictions, he often appeared, in comparison with Thackeray, as the clearer mirror, in which were reflected the hopes of his readers. As the following chapter will show, this same critical bias towards intuitive perception of man's spiritual capacities determined the nature of the discussion about the relative realism of the two authors.

CHAPTER FIVE

"MEN AS THEY REALLY ARE IN THEMSELVES" :

DICKENS AND THACKERAY, 1850 - 70 (2)

The need for faith in man's perfectibility, reflected in the opposition of optimism and cynicism, inevitably influenced Victorian concepts of artistic truthfulness. Any novel which claimed to be 'real' must include at least one example of human dignity, casting the light of heaven upon the earthly life around and so leading men towards perfection. Fiction in the 50's and 60's continued to be judged by external criteria - by the extent to which it embodied accepted views of man's spiritual potential in a story of the duties of ordinary life. At the same time, in their search for a higher reality, some critics became aware that clear-cut distinctions between good and evil were incompatible with depictions of everyday experience in all its complexity. In real life, character was a combination of various qualities, good and bad, each affecting the other and all operating under the influence of circumstances. Only in the world of romance, where the restrictive conditions of actuality were removed, could moral characteristics be developed to their full extent, without interference from the qualifying factors of ordinary existence. Yet, although the desire, already voiced by Mill in the 30's, to return to this older and simpler literary genre grew out of a desire for glowing pictures of illimitable human glory, it was also a silent confession of the justification which life afforded for the views of the cynic, since it implied that perfection was impossible in the present world. The upholder of romance, only able to discover the ideal in some imaginary region, was more sceptical (though he did not admit as much) than the believer in the romance of reality, who located the ideal in life itself. Both, however, identified the purely realistic novel with the belittlement of humanity

which they sought to escape, because, treating man as a purely social animal determined by artificial conventions and customs, it ignored those more real and essential features of human nature which were universal and eternal rather than local and temporal. Since these former qualities were generally, for the Victorians, spiritual ones, the contrast of elemental and accidental truth was inseparable from the opposition of optimism and scepticism.

(1)

For some critics, Thackeray was to be more highly valued than his contemporary as a delineator of human nature, because his characters, drawn from familiar experience, were more true to general humanity than the highly individualised eccentrics drawn by Dickens. John Moore Capes, reviewing Great Expectations for the Rambler, objected (with Wemmick in mind) to the author's method of "describing a man by an ever-recurring absurdity . . . by his having a mouth like a letter-box, or by his firing a gun at sundown". He concluded: "A novelist of a more creative genius describes not a particular individual, but a general character, summed up in one, but fitting many, like Major Pendennis."¹ Another critic, S.F. Williams, in his Essays of 1862, also pointed to this contrast of "particular" and "general" as a leading aspect of the difference between Dickens and Thackeray: "[the figures] of the former are individual men, but those of the latter are individual and representative"². James Hannay, by implication, made a similar comparison between the two authors in his Course of English Literature (1866). The memorable

¹ Rambler, January 1862, n.s. vi, 275.

² "Thackeray", Essays, Critical, Biographical and Miscellaneous, p. 57.

characters of Dickens, he remarked, were "more or less odd and irregular specimens of humanity", and each of them was "an individual" instead of "a species"³. His comments on Thackeray, six pages further on, were certainly intended to be read in the light of these earlier comments :

Given a born oddity, a natural, it is comparatively easy to raise excitement about him; but it is a rarer faculty to walk into a club and pull out a gentleman exceedingly like his neighbours in talk and look, and to make all England feel an interest in him. This is Thackeray's art, and in this he is unrivalled This is a deeper kind of art than the more showy kind which tickles the vulgar⁴

Hannay's oblique comparison was partly based on the proposition that the vulgar Dickens, unlike the well-bred Thackeray, was incapable of painting a gentleman, since the upper classes of society could not offer him the same rough and bizarre surfaces as the lower. But added to this was the assumption shared with Capes and Williams, that the artist was more properly engaged upon the depiction of those general features in which one man resembled another than those which marked off the individual most sharply from his fellows.

In part, this supposition derived from the neo-classical tradition which, a century earlier, had produced Johnson's dictum : "In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species."⁵ This dislike of particularity was, however, strengthened by the distrust of individualism characteristic of some inhabitants of the post-Romantic era. Dickens's delight in the

³ A Course of English Literature, p. 322.

⁴ Ibid., 328.

⁵ Preface to Shakespeare (1759), Johnson on Shakespeare (ed. Walter Raleigh, 1908; 1925 ed.), p. 12.

grotesque, declared the Spectator approvingly in 1870, had done more to make men tolerant of "individual eccentricity" than Mill could ever do in an essay on the subject of Liberty.⁶ The characters of Dickens, as this critic saw, could very easily be taken as examples of the "pagan self-assertion" championed by Mill, for they were without doubt "markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity."⁷ To those who followed the path of "Christian self-denial", and believed with Maurice that men should "be like their fellows"⁸, Dickens's more strongly-marked comic and semi-comic figures, like his men and women of original and self-sufficient virtue, denied the supremacy of moral authority, since they recognised no law other than that of their own personalities. The personages depicted by Thackeray, on the other hand, resembling so closely people of the everyday world, were more readily assimilated into the mass of humanity. In their preference for the general over the particular, Hannay, Capes and Williams, whether consciously or not, placed themselves against Mill and on the side of Maurice.

At the same time, the habit, praised by Hannay, of taking unremarkable gentlemen from the clubs of Pall Mall and representing them as average specimens of human nature seemed to more hostile readers of Thackeray to indicate a deterministic outlook. By virtue of their very ordinariness, which recommended them to those repelled by Dickensian abnormality, his characters were mediocrities, who had no life except in relation to social custom and whose reality was therefore limited. They were characters of manners, who, in a way different to the grotesques of Dickens, were of particular rather than general relevance, since

⁶ "Charles Dickens", Spectator, 11 June 1870, xliii, 716.

⁷ See above, p. 28.

⁸ See above, p. 46.

they were inseparable from the conditions of a purely local state of society. Thus, as the Prospective Review noted, while Dickens was "perhaps too anxious to invest all his characters with some particular interest or to distinguish them by some striking quality", marking them "by direct eccentricities of speech and person", Thackeray wearied the reader "by his profusion of common-place people"⁹, who were prisoners of their environment :

With scarcely an exception, his men and women are not only common-place, but utter weaklings, cased in conventionalities of every sort He introduces us to nature it is true, but to nature in fetters A helpless sense of oppression haunts us all through his books His men and women . . . are all presented as hardened, fixed, moulded, by the circumstances of society¹⁰

Objecting elsewhere, as was seen in the last chapter, to the morbid modern taste, indulged by Thackeray, for characters who were "striving . . . to determine . . . what their inmost selves would really be about", this writer here showed an equal aversion to those who remained statically subservient to circumstances. Thackeray apparently lent support both to the restlessness of post-Romanticism and to the determinism of the empiricists, uniting the two in the person of Pen, the dissatisfied weakling. Yet the Prospective critic himself, emphasising the necessity of work as an antidote to self-consciousness, was, like Carlyle, fatalistically inclined. He allowed the human will to operate only as an instrument of unbending moral law.

The belief that Thackeray was restricted to the portrayal of man

⁹ Prospective Review, May 1851, vii, 169.

¹⁰ Ibid., 170.

on his merely conventional side was widespread. Roscoe, in his 1856 National Review essay, treated him consistently as "a painter of manners, not of individual men"¹¹. This was seemingly a claim for the superiority of the particular over the general. Roscoe's understanding of the word "individual" was, however, bounded by his adherence to an objective religious viewpoint :

[Thackeray] never penetrates into the interior, secret, real life that every man leads in isolation from his fellows, that chamber of being open only upwards to heaven and downwards to hell The faculty that deals with and represents the individual soul in its complete relations is higher than that which we have ascribed to Mr. Thackeray.¹²

In spite of some apparent uncertainty as to whether heaven and hell actually existed or were simply terms for the dichotomies of the human consciousness, Roscoe was ostensibly committed to a scheme of values which transcended individuality. It was man in relation to the universe who was the proper subject for art. In the inner chamber of the mind he was most himself, but only because there he was most in touch with the essential and eternal verities. Beyond the local trappings of life in the material world, Roscoe supposed, there lay another life in which the elemental nature of man was freed from the restraints of an impermanent society. Behind the facade observed so accurately by the social realist was the region of the really real. Roscoe, in spite of his phraseology, was thus moving away from the particular towards the general, and not vice-versa. The individual for him was only of interest in so far as it was representative of the spiritual experience of mankind as a whole.

His opinion of Thackeray as a painter of "manners" rather than "men" was shared by others. Walter Bagehot wrote in 1864 that the novelist at

¹¹ National Review, January 1856, 11, 179.

¹² Ibid.

times allowed himself "no room for a purely intellectual and just estimate of men as they really are in themselves, and apart from social perfection or defects."¹³ Like Roscoe, Bagehot believed that man's essential nature could be separated from his accidental identity as a social being. Francis Turner Palgrave, in the Westminster Review of 1860, clearly held the same faith. The title of his essay, "W.M. Thackeray as Novelist and Photographer", epitomised the approach of those who disparaged Thackeray as a writer capable of seeing no further than the surface characteristics of socially determined existence. "Cloudland and the clear heavens", Palgrave declared, were outside the scope of the photographic method, so that Thackeray was obliged to exclude from his fiction "almost every mode of life which does not fall within social precincts"¹⁴. This same unwillingness to step outside social life caused Margaret Oliphant, the prolific novelist and essayist, to describe him in 1855 as "an historian of human nature . . . in its company dress"¹⁵, and the Spectator to claim in 1861 that: "As a picture of human life, nothing could be more inadequate than Mr. Thackeray's works. As a satire upon social life, nothing could be much richer or more comprehensive."¹⁶ Satirist, daguerrotypist or photographer, painter of manners, portrait painter - these were the labels affixed to Thackeray throughout the Victorian period, reflecting the conviction that he was restricted to the depiction of a purely local truth. Even admirers classified him in the same way. One of the British Controversialist debaters, for instance, squashing the idea that Dickens possessed "life-like powers of description", compared his

¹³ National Review, April 1864, xviii, 552.

¹⁴ Westminster Review, October 1860, n.s. xviii, 516 - 7.

¹⁵ "Mr. Thackeray and his Novels", Blackwood's, January 1855, lxxvii, 96.

¹⁶ "Mr. Thackeray's Satire", Spectator, 30 November 1861, xxxiv, 1314.

"caricatures" with Thackeray's "unmistakable photographs"¹⁷. Among his detractors, however, this method of describing him served a partly defensive purpose. By proving that his fiction transcribed particular features of contemporary fashionable society, they diminished the applicability of his pessimism to general humanity.

S.F. Williams, influenced by Ruskin, attributed to Thackeray's photography a power far beyond that granted it by Palgrave. Thackeray, in his eyes, was an artist-hero cast in the Carlylean mould, whose glance pierced to the heart of reality in all things, and whose camera-like accuracy showed him to be possessed of that objective humility which constituted the prime requisite of the Ruskinian painter :

our novelist asserts that nature should not be altered and modified . . . that truth, in howsoever mean and insignificant clothing, is beautiful; that art is not the corrector, but the exponent of God's works, that everything should be photographed with stern exactitude, as in a camera . . . the artist's fancies, the ideal beauties, the ought to be, must be trodden under foot The first and essential matter is that he apprehend the soul of the thing; that, as Ruskin says of Turner, he "dwell and commune with nature," watching her subtlest workings: and then art comes in as an assistant, in the description or interpretation.¹⁸

The photographer, for Williams, so far from being limited to the reproduction of surface characteristics, was the passive servant who faithfully mirrored the inner reality of God's creation. He was a visionary, but one whose visions were of the truth, not of subjective fantasy. Dickens, by contrast, had plainly given himself to "the ought to be" : "Between Thackeray and Dickens . . . there is an immense difference in

¹⁷ British Controversialist, July 1858, n.s. vi, 30 - 1.

¹⁸ Essays, pp. 44-5.

this matter of naturalness [Dickens's] characters are not likenesses of 'the things that be.' "¹⁹ Later, this point was reiterated :

[Thackeray's] persons are more true to life [than Dickens's] in the sphere in which they move. He sees deeper He delves into the depths of human nature. He adheres rigidly to the outward manifestations and circumstances of life as they come before him. He rejects the heroic and the ideal ²⁰

To Williams, "the ought to be" was a dream, and "the ideal" had no place in serious art. This was thoroughly in accordance with the Victorian reaction against Romantic yearnings. However, if to banish "ideal beauties" and "the heroic" from art meant to exclude all images of perfection, an occurrence which would hardly have been deemed compatible with objectivity by Ruskin himself, then there were many Victorian critics who would have argued that the idealist had a deeper perception of the essential nature of man than the realist. While Thackeray was, as Mrs. Oliphant said, "an historian", and therefore limited to copying what was, Dickens presented what might or ought to be, and so could aspire, for critics more admiring than Williams, to the title of poet. The relationship between the two novelists would then be the reverse of that suggested by Hannay and Williams, since the statements of the poet, in Aristotelian terms, were "universals" and those of the historian "singulars"²¹.

The "Spasmodic" poet, Sidney Dobell, writing in 1850, was the first to make a comparison of this kind :

Thackeray has drawn uniformly from without; Dickens from within. Thackeray has painted his portraits to the life, with a nicety of instinctive taste which

¹⁹ Ibid., p.47.

²⁰ Ibid., p.57.

²¹ Aristotle, Poetics, ix (trans. Ingram Bywater, 1920), p. 43.

made them infallible; but then they were portraits, and limited to the circle of the author's outward experience. Dickens has drawn principally by amplifying and pursuing ideals²²

Drawing character from within, Dickens would naturally have a surer hold upon that "interior, secret, real life" of the soul which Thackeray, in the estimate of Roscoe, had so fatally neglected. The difference between them was that while one was confined to empirical "experience", the other had entrance into poetic realms, where more than the social surfaces of man were revealed. Dobell did not specify what he understood by the term "ideals" as applied to the personages of Dickens, but it was clear from later remarks in the same essay that he meant it to have a moral significance, since he referred to the creation of images "of human grandeur and beauty" as the highest task of art²³. He believed that the function of literature was to set before men pictures of human perfection, the ought to be, and that the aim of the artist was to instruct. The poet wrote, he thought, "for the worship" of men (that is, in order to encourage in them a reverence for nobility and virtue), and the novelist "for the uses of men" (that is, to encourage them in the active pursuit of goodness)²⁴. The Romantic yearning for unlimited expansion of the spirit was thus made respectable by Dobell, by imposing upon it a framework of moral discipline. Shorn of the impracticality and limitlessness of Romantic longing, the "ideal" was given the purpose of refuting the materialism and determinism of a writer like Thackeray and providing an account of life's more spiritual possibilities. Generally, when used in praise, the word indicated a deeper and wider range of truth than that which came within the purely

²² "Currer Bell", Palladium, September 1850, i, 161; rptd. Life and Letters of Sidney Dobell (ed. E.J., 2 vols., 1878), i, 163.

²³ Palladium, 162; Life, 164 - 5.

²⁴ Palladium, 172; Life, 182.

local observation of the photographic realist. The idealist painted the essential features of man, which the social historian ignored in favour of the accidental. The former, therefore, could, in fact, claim to be the greater realist, since his art took a more extensive view of life.

(ii)

In the year following Dobell's contrast of the two novelists, a comparison between the real and the ideal styles of art formed one of the main points of David Masson's essay on Pendennis and Copperfield in the North British Review. In this case, however, the moral function of the latter style was less in evidence than in Dobell's essay.

The general concept of idealism, as first expounded by Masson in this article, was expressed in terms of heroic (or "high") painting, from which it appeared that Dickens's serious characters rather than his comic grotesques were the basis of his classification as a non-realistic artist :

In the real style of art, the aim is to produce pictures that shall impress by their close and truthful resemblance to something or other in real nature or life A picture executed in [the ideal] style strikes, not by recalling real scenes and occurrences, but by taking the mind out of itself into a region of higher possibilities, wherein objects shall be more glorious, and modes of action more transcendent, than any we see, and yet all shall seem in nature the real style is sometimes, though perhaps not very happily, called Low Art, and the ideal style, High Art.²⁵

²⁵ North British Review, May 1851, xv, 69 - 70.

The realist, as defined here, would be a member of the Dutch school (despised by Ruskin for its merely imitative skills), while the idealist would belong with the Italian painters. The difference between them would be approximately the same as that between Jan Steen and Michelangelo, or, perhaps more appropriately, W.P. Frith and Sir Frederick Leighton. While the former class of painter dealt with facts, the latter concentrated upon "transcendent" poetry, showing men in situations which enabled them to be greater than they appeared in ordinary life. Yet, although Masson stressed the elevating effect which such art could have upon the beholder's mind, raising it above the petty concerns of everyday into a purer air, he nowhere suggested that the purpose of idealism was to encourage men in the pursuit of perfection by presenting for their emulation images of human greatness and goodness. The "glorious" objects and actions depicted by the idealist were "possibilities" not in the sense that they could be achieved by man on earth or in heaven, but rather in the sense that they afforded glimpses of what man might be, if he were freed from material conditions and so given the opportunity to realise to the full the qualities of heroism, virtue and beauty which existed in real life but only in conjunction with other qualifying factors and in subjection to the influence of time and circumstance. The characters of Shakespeare, said Masson, were "grand hyperbolic beings created by the breath of the poet himself out of hints taken from all that is most sublime in nature . . . humanity caught, as it were, and kept permanent in its highest and extremest mood"²⁶. The permanence which was attributed to the ideal removed it completely from the changes wrought by time on the characters of the realist. But, by liberating man from the bonds of actuality, the art which Masson

26 Ibid., 75.

described approached that "unconditioned" sphere which, five years later, Bagehot saw as the setting for the poetry of Shelley²⁷. The ideal, as Masson interpreted it, lacked the explicit moral significance attached to it by Mrs. Oliphant, for instance, in 1855 :

Mr. Thackeray is no poet; for one of the highest of the poet's vocations, and perhaps the noblest work of which genius is capable, is to embody the purest ideal soul in the most life-like human garments; and this is an effort which our author has not yet attempted. . . . the highest ideal of the poets is but a fit and seemly acknowledgement of the excellence which has been made possible to our favoured race [by following the example of Christ]; and . . . the circle of life and manners is not complete, till we have admitted into it the loftiest as well as the lowest example of human existence - the saint no less than the sinner.²⁸

Here the didactic function of the ideal was uppermost, as it was not in Masson's definition. Though both critics thought in terms of human sublimity, Mrs. Oliphant believed that perfection was "possible" on earth, as the lives of Christ and the saints bore witness, while Masson could find it nowhere but in literature, where the suspension of time and the removal of constraining conditions made possible what was impossible in the world of reality. The qualities which the idealist embodied in his characters were certainly present in human nature, but were never fully realised amidst the limitations and complexities of the material world - they represented an unfulfilled potential. Thus, Masson was both less pragmatic than Mrs. Oliphant in his conception of literature, since he did not attribute to it any moral power, and more pessimistic, since he relegated pure virtue to the realms of fiction.

²⁷ See above, p. 77.

²⁸ Blackwood's, January 1855, lxxvii, 96.

Another important difference between these two critics was that, whereas Mrs. Oliphant regarded the ideal as synonymous with moral perfection, Masson's understanding of the term encompassed not only those of Dickens's characters from whom a lesson could be drawn but also the novelist's comic creations, who were not easily adapted to such a purpose. It was nonsense, he claimed, to say of Dickens's personages, intending the observation as praise, that they were life-like :

They are nothing of the kind. Not only are his serious or tragic creations - his Old Humphreys, his Maypole Hughs, his little Nells &c. - persons of romance; but even his comic or satiric portraitures do not come within the strict bounds of the real. There never was a real Mr. Pickwick, a real Sam Weller, a real Mrs. Nickleby, a real Quilp, a real Micawber, a real Uriah Heep, or a real Toots, in the same accurate sense that there has been or might be a real Major Pendennis, a real Captain Costigan, a real Becky, a real Sir Pitt Crawley, and a real Mr. Foker [Dickens's] characters are real only thus far, that they are transcendental renderings of certain hints furnished by nature. Seizing the notion of some oddity as seen in the real world, Mr. Dickens has run away with it into a kind of outer or ideal region, there to play with it and work it out at leisure as extravagantly as he might choose, without the least impediment from any facts except those of his own story.²⁹

Including in the ideal such figures as Quilp and Toots, Masson was perhaps using the term at this point to refer to the depiction of ideas rather than things. This latter supposition is supported by the account of Dickens's creative processes in the same critic's book, British Novelists and their Styles (1859) :

There never was a Mr. Micawber in nature, exactly as he appears in the pages of Dickens; but Micawberism pervades nature through and through; and to have extracted

²⁹ North British Review, 74 - 5.

this quality from nature, embodying the full essence of a thousand instances of it in one ideal monstrosity, is a feat of invention.³⁰

A character such as Micawber made no pretence of being a portrait of a real-life pauper. Rather, he was an embodiment of the idea of irrepressible poverty, a summing-up of that spirit of hopeful impecuniosity which existed in actuality but, like the sublimity captured by Shakespeare, could not be separated, except in the imagination, from the other characteristics which would normally accompany it or from the effects of external conditions. Micawber represented not Micawber, a particular man, but the abstract concept of "Micawberism", isolated from all qualifying features and allowed unlimited scope for expansion, by translation to a region where the laws of the world did not operate with the rigidity necessary in realistic fiction. Instead of condemning the novelist, as John Moore Capes did, for constructing his figures from a single attribute, Masson transformed this practice into an advantage. Each of the characters of Dickens gained general relevance by concentrating within itself the essence of one widespread human quality. Once again, the moral possibilities of the ideal were ignored, Masson's use of the word "essence" carrying with it no implication that the idealist perceived the essential portion of man's existence, but simply referring to the process of simplification which was carried out by this type of art.

Masson was undoubtedly motivated in his championship of Dickens's right to depart from absolute truth to nature by a sense of confinement within the details of realistic fiction. The characters of Thackeray, he wrote in 1851, were kept "within the limits, and rigidly true to the features, of real existence."³¹ Though Masson declared that he liked

³⁰ British Novelists, pp. 251 - 2.

³¹ North British Review, 74.

"both styles well"³², expressions such as "within the limits" and "rigidly true" indicated that he desired, as a balance to such fiction as Thackeray's, a prose literature which would offer limitless liberty. Yet this Romantic impulse towards freedom and space was severely curtailed by the neo-classical tendencies of his criticism, which stressed the selective rather than the creative faculties of the artist. Dickens's characters were not emanations from the brain of the novelist, but "renderings of certain hints furnished by nature". Micawber did not spring full-grown from the author's head, but was a combination "of a thousand instances" from life. Masson's ideal, in fact, was not, as he claimed, "transcendental" - it was a continuation of the empirical ideal of the eighteenth century, involving the abstraction of ideas from the world of sense and the synthesising of these into one perfect form. Therefore, although he noted that in this style of art "the conception or intention supplied by the painter" was more in evidence than in any other³³, and though he granted the "ideal region" autonomy, calling it "a world projected imaginatively beyond the real one, or inserted into the midst of the real one, and yet imaginatively moated round from it"³⁴, he nonetheless remained closely dependent upon objective and immediate reality for his notion of the idealist's material. While the realist always asked himself, "How would this actually be in nature; in what exact setting of surrounding particulars would it appear?", the question asked by the non-realist was :

What can be made out of this, with what human conclusions, ends, and aspirations can it be imaginatively interwoven, so that the whole, though attached to

³² Ibid., 77.

³³ Ibid., 69 - 70.

³⁴ British Novelists, p. 250.

nature by its origin, shall transcend or overlies
 nature on the side of the possibly existent -
 the might, could, or should be, or the might, could
 or should have been?³⁵

The characters of a writer like Dickens, so far from being subjective expressions of their creator's state of mind or absolute fantasies, were representations of qualities which were inherent in life itself and which the artist's genius had separated from the "surrounding particulars" which normally obscured and qualified them. The "ideal region", unlike that of the Romantics, remained "attached" to the present world, as if by an umbilical chord.

Furthermore, in spite of his vindication of Dickens's methods, Masson's interest in the ideal sprang primarily, as his mention of Shakespeare hinted, from a wish for "sublime" images of humanity, and this also restricted the scope which he allowed to imagination. As his general summary of the state of the modern novel at the conclusion of British Novelists made clear, the realist's "affection for mean social detail"³⁶ was associated for him with the cynical belittlement of man, and the idealist's spaciousness with belief in the divine ordering of the universe. This opposition, he thought, was best presented in the conflicting viewpoints of Mephistopheles and the three Archangels in the Prologue to Goethe's Faust³⁷. After quoting the song of Raphael, Gabriel and Michael in praise of God's governance of the four elements, Masson went on, in the closing pages of his book, to remark upon the contrasting tenor of the devil's speech, in which man was made to seem no larger than a grasshopper and no nobler than a beast rooting in the dirt. These two moods appeared in the literature of all ages, from Homer downwards, and there was no reason why the comparatively recent novel form should not be equally capable of including

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 250-1

³⁶ Ibid., p. 306.

³⁷ Ibid.

both, though, at the moment Masson wrote, it was inclining dangerously, he thought, towards the less poetic :

No more than our metrical Poetry must this form of literature be permitted to degenerate into a ceaseless variation of the speech of Mephistopheles, that men are as miserable as ever and that the world is all in a mess. It may be that the representation of social reality is, on the whole, the proper business of the Novel; but even in the representation of social reality the spirit may be that of the far-surveying and the sublime. I believe, however, that there may be vindicated for the literature of prose phantasy the liberty of an order of fiction different from the usual Novel of Social Reality, and approaching more to what has always been allowed in metrical poesy, and that, accordingly, those occasional prose fictions are to be welcomed which deal with characters of heroic imaginary mould, and which remove us from cities and the crowded haunts of men.³⁸

The idealism which Masson most admired was not that of Micawber but of epic and romance, in which the ideas abstracted from reality and allowed unlimited development were those of unqualified human virtue and courage, forming the strongest possible contrast to the realist's portrayal of the socially determined and meaner aspects of man's life. The connotations of perfection which surrounded the ideal, though never employed for didactic ends such as those of Mrs. Oliphant, lay always in Masson's mind. He commented, for instance, in 1851, on the fact that the protagonist of Greek tragedy was not "a puny 'man and brother,' resembling ourselves in his virtues and his foibles, but an ancestor and a demigod, large, superb, and unapproachable."³⁹ The same concern with elevated

³⁸ Ibid., p. 308.

³⁹ North British Review, 75.

subjects which motivated other critics impelled Masson in this return upon Promethean semi-divinity (without Promethean self-assertion). Unable to find heroic stature in the ordinary world - he agreed with Thackeray's gloomy estimate of the human condition ⁴⁰ - he was driven for emotional satisfaction into the realm of higher possibilities provided by literature, in which the gods and heroes whom life could not supply were alone to be found. His distinction between the real and the ideal was the direct outcome of a conflict within himself between deep-rooted pessimism based on experience and the need for a view which was brighter even if purely imaginative.

Thackeray was easily enough identified with Mephistopheles. In the early 50's, Charlotte Brontë⁴¹ and Thomas Powell⁴² had both likened him to the sneering fiend, while Lewes had defended him from the charge of being a "mocking Mephistopheles"⁴³. Most important of all, Masson himself had drawn the parallel in 1851, when he referred to the same speech from Faust as a summary of the sceptical views held both by Pen - "He is, like Mephistopheles, a pococurante" - and, to some extent, by Thackeray (though the latter was also allowed to show, through George Warrington, some flashes of the spirit of Raphael)⁴⁴. It was also Thackeray who, in the final words of Pendennis, had described his 'hero' as "a man and a brother", the phrase quoted by Masson as a contrast to the practice of the Greek dramatists. Both as depicter of social reality and as cynic, Thackeray reiterated the creed of Mephistopheles. It was impossible, Masson felt, for man to appear in a

⁴⁰ See above, p. 178.

⁴¹ 10 January 1850, The Brontës (ed. Wise and Symington), iii, 67.

⁴² Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain, p. 105.

⁴³ Leader, 21 December 1850, i, 929 - 30.

⁴⁴ North British Review, 86.

heroic light amidst the drab environment of modernism. No one could be further removed from Oedipus or Orestes, Heracles in the Alcestis, or (to move to the epic) from Homer's Achilles, Ajax or Diomedes, than the weak-willed Pen, that Victorian Ulysses/Telemachus whose only Mentor (an allusion made by Thackeray himself) was a worldly, self-centred uncle.

At the same time the line of descent from the Greek demigod to Pickwick or Toots was at best a tenuous one (though, fifty years later, G.K. Chesterton was not to think so). Whatever the nature of their victory over time and circumstance, Dickens's comic characters were not embodiments of "all that is most sublime in nature", and in their strongly-marked individualism were very far removed from the more generalised personages of classical literature. It has already been noted that Masson tended to stress the general rather than the particular nature of a figure such as Micawber, whom he saw not as an exemplar of the "pagan self-assertion" justified by Mill but as a synthesis of human "Micawberism". He was not interested in the eccentric personalism of the Dickens world, which his criticism minimised and even attacked - the more "grotesque" creatures of the novelist's stories, he wrote, were a misuse of the idealist's right to hyperbole⁴⁵. Moreover, these humorous figures were normally set against a background of London streets - Dickens and Thackeray, said Masson himself, "might well be considered as the founders of . . . 'The British Metropolitan Novel' "⁴⁶ - and this use of "cities and the crowded haunts of men" had to be ignored almost entirely if Dickens was to be established as the presenter of an "ideal region." Tied to the greyness of the capital on one side and indulging in the creation of grotesques on the other, Dickens, in the final analysis,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁶ British Novelists, p.239.

was an unsatisfactory substitute for Aeschylus, Shakespeare and the Archangels, but, within the context of mid-nineteenth century fiction, he was the most prominent representative of non-realistic art, the obvious opponent of the strict attention to social circumstances evident in the work of Thackeray.

Masson's interest in the sublimity of the great dramatists of whom Dickens, in some measure, was the descendant, still did not lead him to a moral interpretation of the ideal such as that given by Mrs. Oliphant. His idealism was un-Victorian in so far as it was credited with no apparent purpose beyond that of pleasure. No suggestion was made that to read of heroic men and virtuous women would produce an improvement in man's heart or even cause him to aspire towards self-improvement - such, in any case, could not be the effect of *Quilp*, *Toots* and *Micawber*. Nor was it implied that the ideal had any actual existence, in however dim and distant a futurity. It simply offered irresponsible escape from the heavy dullness of mortal clay and the pressures of time and circumstance, and to this extent reflected Masson's yearning for a realm of poetry which, like Shelley's, should be "unconditioned". Clearly, however, if this idealism was not wholly Victorian, it was not entirely Romantic either. It was firmly attached to earth by Masson's insistence on the empirically selective rather than the transcendently creative talent of the artist. This neo-classical restraint prevented it from soaring away into the Shelleyan vagueness of "the intense inane". At the same time, Romantic freedom was also qualified in Masson's work by the pessimism which it was called into life to oppose. He was always conscious of the reality depicted by a writer like Thackeray, whose dark world of knaves and fools he admitted was no distortion of the real world. He never claimed that

Dickens showed a more essential level of human experience than his fellow-author, but instead treated the two viewpoints as complementary. Mephistopheles and the "Novel of Social Reality", he recognised, passed observations upon life which his own observation confirmed. It was as a refuge from this experience that he sought the ideal, but he never turned his back upon the actuality from which he sometimes desired relief.

(iii)

It is impossible to determine the exact influence that Masson's comparison between the real and the ideal exerted over the critics of the 50's and 60's, particularly since Victorian reviewers were not in the habit of acknowledging indebtedness to their colleagues.

One critic who seemed to make use of the 1851 essay was Forster, in his 1853 notice of Bleak House, but in such a way that Masson's concept of the ideal was totally altered. The best of Dickens's characters, he wrote, were each made "to embody some characteristic feature, to personify some main idea, which are ever after found universally applicable." In this case, however, the ideas for imitation, so far from being the inhabitants of an "ideal region", remained firmly rooted in the here and now to which Forster had always maintained that Dickens was faithful. In a passage which constituted another oblique attack upon Thackeray, the simplicity of character based on a single attribute was justified in terms of everyday experience and contrasted with the attempted subtleties of the psychological novelist :

They know little how much there is in any one man's head or heart who expect to have every character in a tale laid bare before them as on a psychological dissecting table, and demonstrated minutely. We see

nobody minutely in real life men touch and interfere with one another by the contact of their extremes, and it is the prominences, the sharp angles, that are most likely to appear in a tale really worth telling. Hence it is therefore . . . that the dramatist or novelist is concerned chiefly with the display of salient points in each one of his characters.⁴⁷

This was extremely dangerous ground. Allowing his dislike of Thackeray's motive-hunting to cloud his judgement, Forster naïvely argued, not merely that art should represent reality, but that it should reproduce life as it appeared to men in the actual process of experiencing it. The novelist was to make no attempt to see beyond surface characteristics, and human nature was to be taken always at face-value. What each man saw of his neighbour in their public encounters was the yardstick for character in fiction. Had Thackeray's dissective skills led primarily to the discovery of goodness instead of self-interest, Forster's attitude would almost certainly have been entirely different. His dislike of psychological anatomy was inseparable from his hatred of scepticism.

This extremism left Forster more entirely dependent on present reality than Masson. While arguing that the method of Dickens gave a more essential view of human nature than Thackeray's, because it focussed the reader's attention on the simplest and most important points, he also believed that this view of man was easily obtained in daily life. The ideas which Dickens selected for portrayal were firmly set in the context of ordinary existence, Forster having no intention of allowing the slightest suspicion of fantasy to mar the absolute reality which he attributed to his leader's work. More obviously

⁴⁷ Examiner, 8 October 1853, 644.

influenced by Masson was a critic signing himself F.E.S., who, in the British Journal of 1852, hailed Dickens for his wonderful talent :

not only of reproducing the ideas he has acquired in a form of his own creation, but of presenting that form idealized, raised, ennobled, by the beautifying power of his genius. We recognize, indeed, the likeness to some familiar thing, but we recognize it as we never thought to behold it - purified, spiritualized, and embellished through the medium of an intelligence superior to our own. In this power lies the secret of the difference between the writings of Dickens and those of the author of Vanity Fair - Mr. Thackeray is perhaps even the closer observer of the two, and his descriptive talent seems actually to place the person or thing described, before the reader, but the conception leaves Mr. Thackeray's mind as it entered it; the dross still mingling with and depreciating the unstamped metal. ⁴⁸

On the following page, Dickens was defended against the charge of caricature:

however ideal [his] characters may appear, they are invariably self-consistent; if not realities, they are possibilities; if they do not exist, they might, and as we think, ought to do so. ⁴⁹

All of these thoughts bore the imprint of Masson, deriving from his definition of ideal art as one "of higher possibilities, wherein objects shall be more glorious, and modes of action more transcendent, than any we see". F.E.S.'s remarks thus appeared to refer to Dickens's serious characters, not to his comedy. Basically, they were a restatement, in heightened form, of the novelist's genius for eliciting poetry from the "familiar" appearances of common life. Adopting the concept of "ideas" taken from external reality, F.E.S. did not follow Masson in supposing that the artist combined "a thousand instances" from nature.

⁴⁸ "A Few Stray Thoughts on the Genius of Dickens", British Journal, March 1852, 1, 137.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 138.

Rather the ideal was a transfigured version of some particular object in the workaday world, raised into generality by the mysterious force of visionary inspiration. Dickens was a figure of prophetic stature, gifted with the ability to see into and give physical shape to the spiritual "possibilities" of the world around him, whereas Thackeray was limited to the material aspect of things, unable to burn away the "dross" from the objects and persons he observed and exhibit the purity of the refined gold which lay at their centre. Thus, even while F.E.S. used much of Masson's terminology, he treated Dickens very differently, finding in him a poet of sublime capacities. The point, not made by the earlier critic, that Dickens showed a more essential level of human nature than Thackeray, was clearly implied here, though it was not claimed that the glories he depicted had any existence in real life.

Both F.E.S. and Forster used the "ideas" of Masson for their own particular purposes, and neither could therefore be said to be his follower. Nor did his notion of the "ideal region" obtain a great deal of currency amongst Victorian critics, perhaps because of its escapist connotations. The inevitable consequence of entry into a closed world of art was, for the practical man, a sense of guilt at his evasion of the task that lay immediately at hand. Reviewing Our Mutual Friend in 1865, the critic of the Christian Spectator was uneasily aware that a liking for Dickens was not compatible with a strict attention to present responsibilities. Defoe, Fielding and Thackeray, he knew, took a higher place in the ranks of literature than Bulwer or Dickens, because of their fidelity to life, but honesty compelled him to add that the unreality of the last-named novelist nevertheless exerted a strong hold over him :

The fact is, in reading a book of Dickens we do not care to inquire whether it is actually true, because we feel it is amusing. We are half-vexed when our

attention is called to the subject. We prefer to live in the world which he has created, and peopled with the creatures of his brain and heart.

It is not our world; the world of our duty, temptations and hopes; but it is one into which we are sometimes glad to escape.⁵⁰

Unable to feel that this second world, here seen as completely subjective, had any merit beyond that of providing entertainment, the reviewer could not grant Dickens the seriousness of more realistic novelists. Emotionally, however, he felt, with Masson, the need of some outlet for his imagination, in spite of the sense of irresponsibility which resulted from succumbing to the spell cast by the novelist's fantasies. He acknowledged the autonomy of the Dickens world, though he insisted on continuing to judge it by reference to external reality. In this application of a dual standard he resembled the British Controversialist writer who, awarding Thackeray first place because of his faithful photographs of the life around him, yet was aware that there might be another measure of artistic reality than that of accurate reproduction of familiar objects and persons, and wrote of Dickens's characters : "we are more and more struck with the reality they embody in themselves, and the unreality they present to aught in our observances of life"⁵¹. Granting them truth and consistency in terms of the world in which they appeared, this critic persisted in looking back to the real world as the yardstick by which art must be measured. More accommodating was Edith Simcox, writing in the Academy in 1870 under the pseudonym of "H. Lawrenny". She commented on Dickens's characters :

That they are altogether fantastic and absurd does not of itself affect their right to exist, and it is a remarkable triumph for their creator, that after a few

⁵⁰ Christian Spectator, December 1865, n.s. vi, 721.

⁵¹ British Controversialist, July 1858, n.s. vi, 31.

hours in his low-life fairy-land they seem as real and as much in accordance with the eternal conditions of human existence as the most common-place characters of a conscientious middle-class novel.⁵²

But Edith Sincox was a devout admirer of George Eliot, and her praise of the "simple amusement"⁵³ to be derived from Dickensian "fairy-land" had perhaps the patronising tone of one who believed that the real material for a novelist was to be gathered from the world which lay before every man's eyes, the Christian Spectator's "world of our duty, temptations and hopes".

Only the future Laureate, Alfred Austin, contributing to Temple Bar in 1870, welcomed without qualification the "fantastic" nature of Dickens's books :

No realistic writer can by any possibility be a great writer . . . the gods know him not. He is at best and highest a literary mechanic Dickens, far from being a realistic writer, was one of the most intensely idealistic writers that ever existed. The most memorable personages in his novels, instead of being copies from life, are the very creatures of his prolific vein For Dickens was a man of visions, and hence his greatness He is, perhaps, the very last . . . of our great unscientific writers. He saw men and things with his own eyes, and glorified them.⁵⁴

The "scientific" writer would be one (like Thackeray) who analysed the motives of his characters and related them to their environment. Austin, in his desire to escape from the fetters of such accurate realism, placed much greater emphasis than Masson had been able to do twenty years before upon the subjective aspect of Dickens's idealism, stressing its derivation from creative imagination instead of its selection from

⁵² Academy, 22 October 1870, ii, 2.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Charles Dickens", Temple Bar, July 1870, xxix, 561 - 2.

life. Although, he said, Dickens used "realistic machinery . . . prodigally for the mise en scène", he did not employ it at all in the central content of his stories, the "dramatis personae"⁵⁵. Effectively, the artist was freed from dependence on external fact, and thus far Austin's attitude constituted an important break with Victorianism. However, he retained the distrust of the age for scientific interpretations of man and its belief that great literature must glorify humanity. His denial of photographic realism was a development of Victorian thought as well as a reaction from it.

Earlier critics did not share Austin's enthusiasm for Dickens's departures from realism, but were prepared for certain reasons to countenance it, at least on occasion. Theodore Martin wrote in 1853 :

Thackeray keeps the realities of life always before his eyes: Dickens wanders frequently into the realms of imagination, and, if at times he only brings back, especially of late, fantastic and unnatural beings⁵⁶, we must not forget, that he has added to literature some of its most beautiful ideals.⁵⁷

Martin apparently thought of the ideal purely in moral terms. He was willing to condone Dickens's want of truth to nature because, at times, it engendered images of poetic beauty (presumably like Little Nell). Fancy, though not to be praised when it produced grotesques, was capable, in its gentler moods, of affording an emotional satisfaction which was either not to be found in the writings of Thackeray or, if found, then in less copious supply than in the work of his rival. A similar view seems to have been taken by W.C. Roscoe, though he took more account of Dickens's comedy :

⁵⁵ Ibid., 561.

⁵⁶ Martin was plainly thinking of the Bleak House grotesques.

⁵⁷ Westminster Review, April 1853, n.s. iii, 370.

Many novelists have a world of their own they inhabit. Thackeray thrusts his characters in among the moving every-day world in which we live. We don't say they are life-like characters; they are mere people Dickens creates a race of beings united to us by common sympathies and affections, endeared to us by certain qualities, and infinitely amusing in their eccentricities. Still, we all know perfectly well they are not really human beings; though they are enough so for his purpose and ours. ⁵⁸

When the sentimental and humorous appeal of characters was so strong the relevance of judgements based upon ordinary standards of realism was diminished. But neither Martin nor Roscoe followed Masson in praising the virtues of non-realistic literature as a genre in its own right. They only conceded Dickens's right to create rather than observe when he provided them with pleasant images, serious or comic, which would increase their "sympathies" with the human race. His tendency towards fantasy was something for which allowances had to be made in view of its successes. As responsible critics, rather than men of feeling, they would have argued that the novel ought to deal with themes and characters of everyday concern, and that Thackeray's fidelity to ordinary experience fulfilled this requirement. But Thackeray's realism was inseparably bound up with his cynicism, which both Martin and Roscoe deplored, and it was therefore necessary to turn to Dickens, who for all his failure to reflect the actual world was able to answer the needs of the heart. One novelist was superior in truth to nature, the other in humanity.

Martin's justification of Dickens's flights of imagination in terms of "beautiful ideals" indicates that for him the ideal was identified with perfection. Having cut themselves off from the yearnings of

Romanticism, the Victorians could only fulfil their suppressed longings for freedom from present reality by giving to fancy a touch of moral purity. Masson's idealism, as has already been shown, was partly held in check by his insistence upon isolation of the more sublime qualities of human nature. In the work of reviewers whose didactic inclinations were more in evidence, Romanticism issued in nostalgia for the uncomplicated virtues and vices which were made possible by that closed world of romance which had been recalled, in 1838, by Mill⁵⁹. This was most evident in critical repudiations of Thackeray's pessimism. "Thackeray's people", observed Thomas Hood, Jr., in 1864, "were so true to the admixture of virtues and failings in this life, that the short-sighted among his readers sighed for the incomparable Pamelas and double-dyed villains of the Minerva press, and called this genius a Cynic."⁶⁰

Among those who sighed in this fashion was Henry F. Chorley in the Athenaeum of 1862, after reading Philip : "The best-natured and most patient of men, or women, tires of keeping shabby company . . . and may be excused for hankering after Alphonso the Brave and the Fair Imogene, or any other impossible Virtue or unmitigated Vice."⁶¹ John Bull, on the same day, looked back to the heroines of Scott for its examples of romance, complaining that Thackeray possessed an unrivalled faculty for penetrating the ways of the drawing-room, but could not paint a Rebecca or a Flora McIvor : "For the deeper passions, or the more heroic strength of woman, such qualities as are evoked by exceptional circumstances of romance, he has no turn."⁶² These were frank appeals for a return to a world where character was allowed to develop to greater heights of nobility (and, for the purpose of moral conflict

⁵⁹ See above, p. 91.

⁶⁰ "Thackeray and his Female Characters", Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, February 1864, n.s. viii, 160.

⁶¹ Athenaeum, 9 August 1862, 174.

⁶² John Bull, 9 August 1862, xlii, 508.

as well as excitement and adventure, to lower depths of infamy) than were possible in real life. To some extent, this realm of romance resembled Masson's "ideal region", since both gave man freedom from the restrictive laws of the present world. Just as Dickens, according to Masson, selected ideas from life, so the Minerva Press novelist could be said to develop the ideas of good and evil in isolation from all qualifying factors, producing characters who were either, as Masson said of Dickens's, "thoroughly and ideally perfect" or "thoroughly and ideally detestable"⁶³. The advocates of romance, however, were more interested in the moral advantages of such single-attribute characters than in any theory of idealism.

Surprisingly, Dickens's "world projected imaginatively beyond the real one" did not provide critics with an example of the romance region to which some of them wished to be temporarily conveyed. There were probably several reasons for this. The bias of his work was too much towards the grotesque to serve a moral purpose (though this did not usually hinder his admirers), and even when his humorous characters were accepted by reviewers it was often only on grounds of simple amusement, as the Christian Spectator notice quoted above indicated. At the same time, his "ideally perfect" creations were not to the taste of every reader, since they revealed, in their original virtue, not only that self-sufficiency to which Acton objected but a freedom from those moral struggles which Victorians regarded as an inevitable part of the battle of life. Masson himself, in a passage from his 1851 essay which showed that a strain of Puritanism existed alongside his repressed Romanticism, remarked that Dickens took too little account of moral heroism and too much of kindness, placing "a facile disposition at the

⁶³ North British Review, 75.

centre of the universe" : "such a man will miss out that great and noble element in all that is human - the element of difficulty."⁶⁴

This was no less important to romance than to realistic narrative, for, while in the latter a man should be depicted overcoming the powers of darkness within himself and rising from his lower nature to his higher, in the former he should be portrayed in active antagonism to an evil which was externalised in the person of a "double-dyed" villain. This war-faring conception of virtue, it was felt by some (though not by all, as the next section will show), was not to be found in Dickens, and this is perhaps a further reason why he did not figure prominently as an exponent of that romance morality which was opposed to the mixture of good and evil to be found in the characters of Thackeray. Even on this level the Dickensian "ideal region" was not taken up.

⁶⁴ North British Review, May 1851, xv, 83. Cf. Carlyle on Dickens : "His theory of life was entirely wrong. He thought men ought to be buttered up, and the world made soft and accomodating for them But it was not in this manner the eternal laws operated, but quite otherwise." (Reported by Charles Gavan Duffy, Conversations with Carlyle (1892), p. 75). Carlyle also said, on the same occasion, that "Thackeray had more reality in him and would cut up into a dozen Dickenses", a remark which may indicate the speaker's belief that, while he was not a hero, Thackeray at least recognised that life was not governed by a "facile" spirit.

(iv)

In Masson's North British article, Dickens's men and women triumphed over circumstance by being removed from its influence. In the comparative review of Pendennis and Copperfield written for the Times in the following month by Samuel Phillips, they achieved the same victory, more conventionally, by the exertion of virtue in the face of adversity. Masson was driven by pessimism to seek the ideal outside life, while Phillips, with greater optimism, discovered his ideal in life and called it the real, crediting Dickens with the ability to portray moral heroism and "the element of difficulty" which Masson denied him. The link between the two critics was that both desired a prose literature which would transcend the merely social.

It has already been shown that critics such as Roscoe, Bagehot, Palgrave, and Mrs. Oliphant, regarded Thackeray as a depicter of man the social animal. None of these writers instituted any comparison with Dickens on this score, though Mrs. Oliphant, in two separate articles contributed to Blackwood's in 1855, provided a basis for one. After commenting on Thackeray's knowledge of "human nature . . . in its company dress", in January 1855, she added that he was "not great in home scenes, where the conventional dress is off, and the good that is in a man expands under the cheerful glow of the domestic fire."⁶⁵ Three months later, in her essay on Dickens, she referred to that novelist as "the historian of a class - the literary interpreter of those intelligent, sensible, warm-hearted households, which are the strength of our country"⁶⁶. At the level of the domestic pieties, Dickens, even if, like Thackeray, he was historian rather than poet, would clearly possess greater

⁶⁵ Blackwood's, January 1855, lxxvii, 96.

⁶⁶ "Charles Dickens", Blackwood's, April 1855, lxxvii, 452.

awareness than his rival of that essential life which was concealed by the conventional masks of society and fostered by the sincerity of the family circle gathered around the hearth. The Leader, in 1857, while endeavouring to maintain a balance between the two men, developed in part the contrast which Mrs. Oliphant did not care to take up, ascribing to Dickens a wider responsiveness to human nature than was possessed by the socially orientated Thackeray :

[Thackeray] is characteristically the painter, not of humanity simply, or of the passions in their most natural manifestation, but of man as seen in society, and of the passions as developed under special social forms. This is, in fact, the main difference between the two great novelists of the day. With all his accumulation of characteristic detail, DICKENS is the poet, not of society, but of humanity, finding in the lowest walks of common life - amongst the outcasts of society beneath the rags and filth - something to reverence and love. THACKERAY is the poet of society looking for the true feeling and manly action that exist amidst its frivolities and hypocrisies, and picturing with truthful charity what he finds.⁶⁷

Here both writers, by virtue of their human sympathies, had been elevated from history into poetry, but the distinction between them was still clear. The fact that Thackeray dealt with manners was not allowed to suggest that he could not appreciate genuine feeling. Nevertheless, though he was cast very much in the mould of Dickens by this critic as a seeker of good in evil, the tag of "poet of society" made it plain that his range of characterisation was bounded by an artificial line not recognised by Dickens.

An antithesis of this kind between "society" and "humanity", if carried to its furthest extreme, could support the assumption,

⁶⁷ Leader, 12 December 1857, viii, 1191.

Wordsworthian in nature, that the further away from the sophistications of civilised life a man was placed the closer he was likely to stand to a state of elemental nature. A fisherman or a shepherd was real, a duke or a clubman artificial and therefore of lesser importance. From the more vital area of experience Thackeray's background and taste had unfortunately cut him off. He only showed the poor in their capacity as servants, complained Francis Palgrave, and had not added to English literature any figure to compare with the lower-class dignity of a Joseph Andrews or a Jeanie Deans⁶⁸. The photographic method was more successful at depicting "the products of art than the masterpieces of nature"⁶⁹.

Upon this sense that the realities of human nature could not exist within the circle of fashionable life Samuel Phillips founded his 1851 comparison of Dickens and Thackeray. In his 1852 Esmond notice, he classified Dickens as a creator of "characters of manners" and Thackeray as a delineator of "characters of nature"⁷⁰, but a year earlier his opinion had been exactly the reverse :

Perhaps no greater distinction can be drawn between [Pendennis and Copperfield] than this, that the one confines itself to the artificial phase of society, the other to the real. Allowing this, the wider scope of Mr. Dickens's novel is at once explained.

Dickens, said Phillips, reflected "the whole world rather than a bit of it". Thackeray, on the other hand, focussed on "drawing-rooms . . . never cottages; fashion rather than nature; in other words, that second nature which custom creates."⁷¹ The explanation for this change of

⁶⁸ Westminster Review, October 1860, n.s. xviii, 517 - 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 516.

⁷⁰ Times, 22 December 1852, 8.

⁷¹ Times, 11 June 1851, 8.

attitude between 1851 and 1852 is not far to seek. In the later year, Phillips had read Bleak House, and disgusted by its monstrosities - "the strange, the wonderful, the abnormal, and the exaggerated"⁷² - turned away from all the low-life figures of Dickens, not merely Krook and Smallweed but Sam Weller. The grotesque individuality of the former, illogically, produced a reaction against the latter, who, since Phillips called him "a character of manners", was a deterministic figure. In Copperfield, on the other hand, the plebeians were neither strongly - marked nor moulded by social custom. They were persons of universal validity, since they embodied qualities of nobility and piety which contrasted with the weakness of Pen. The high lessons inculcated in Dickens's novel, "such as those of faith in Mr. Peggotty and resignation in Ham"⁷³, were superior to anything in Thackeray's chronicle of Mayfair. It was for such reasons of morality that Copperfield took precedence over Pendennis : "we are bound . . . to adjudge the chief merit where the most universal interest is conciliated and the most exalted teaching hidden beneath the tale."⁷⁴ The observations of Phillips on Dickens in his two reviews were alike dictated by moral considerations. Nor was the difference between his judgements of Thackeray as great as it might appear. His later claim that the novelist depicted "nature" was only meant to indicate that Thackeray's portraits were not monstrosities but recognisable social types. Although belonging to "the artificial phase of society" and therefore lacking in the essential humanity of the Yarmouth fisherfolk, his men and women were accurate reproductions from the life not grotesque self-assertive oddities who, it was to be hoped, had never existed. They were true to "nature" within the restrictions

⁷² 22 December 1852, 8.

⁷³ 11 June 1851, 8.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

imposed by a very narrow area of London experience.

That Phillips concluded his 1851 review with the verdict, "The epic is greater than the satire", probably indicated the extent to which, in his mind, Thackeray's concentration on "artificial" manners was at one with cynicism. Copperfield was an epic because it showed all the world not a part, but perhaps also because it dealt with men of heroic and timeless stature, thus encouraging its readers in the way of virtue, while Pendennis, as a satire, dealt with the vices and follies of a specific and ephemeral state of society. The simple-hearted Peggottys represented for Phillips not the working-classes but the essential dignity of universal man, which was excluded from the vulgar drawing-room of Lady Clavering and stifled by the garish splendours of the ballroom at Gaunt House. The purely social vision of Thackeray did not allow play to the finer and larger elements of human nature, only to the smaller and meaner, the "frivolities and hypocrisies" mentioned by the Leader. Ironically, this viewpoint was in part as deterministic as Thackeray's own, since it admitted the power of society to corrupt, even while it argued for the power of the spirit over circumstances in the persons of Ham and Mr. Peggotty.

Neither Phillips nor Masson explicitly took up the deterministic aspects of Thackeray's work, but it is clear from their reactions to Dickens that both were looking for a type of literature in which man was not belittled by the suggestion that he was at the mercy of his environment. Phillips may even have been influenced by Masson's article⁷⁵.

⁷⁵ Dudley Flamm, in his bibliography, Thackeray's Critics (University of North Carolina, 1967), writes that Phillips, following Masson's lead, distinguished the "real and artificial (ideal) approaches" (p.68). This is quite clearly incorrect - it is Phillips's "real" which most nearly corresponds to Masson's "ideal".

Certainly, both men were interested in distinguishing the social realism of Thackeray from the wider freedom of Dickens. A similarity of view was evident in Phillips's claim that Thackeray drew "drawing-rooms . . . never cottages; fashion rather than nature", and Masson's contention that while Thackeray was only at home in descriptions of "the charmed circles of rank, literature, and fashion" and of nature in a social context - "a park, a clump of trees, or the vicinity of a country-house with a village seen in the sunset" - Dickens delighted in painting scenery of all kinds, rural or urban, wild or gentle⁷⁶. Masson proved the point by juxtaposing the descriptions of Lady Clavering's drawing-room in Pendennis and the storm in Copperfield⁷⁷. The connection of this with Phillips's contrast of the "artificial" and the "real" is obvious, and suggests a probable influence. It must be emphasised, however, that Phillips did not follow his immediate predecessor in recommending Dickens for his "transcendental" outlook. Ham and Mr. Peggotty remained for him real human beings whose universality flowed not from translation to an "ideal region" but out of their practical virtues. Their "faith" and "resignation", like the resolution and independence of the old Leech-Gatherer, grew from their struggle with adversity not out of an escape from the conditions of life. Phillips was continuing the tradition, begun in the 30's, of Dickens as the discoverer of "Worth in low places" (to recall Hood's useful phrase). The Peggottys offered to men engaged in the battle of life, and endeavouring to fulfil the great eternal laws, the assurance that humanity was capable of overcoming circumstances by the force of its own inner integrity. Equally, Agnes and Betsy Trotwood were not visions of romance perfection but stood upon "an eminence which women may and do reach in this world"⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ North British Review, 70 - 1.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 71 - 4.

⁷⁸ Times, 11 June 1851, 8.

What for Masson was ideal constituted for Phillips the real.

Dickens's characters from humble life did not always meet with approval, as the response of critics during the 30's and 40's has already made evident. Phillips himself found no elemental human qualities in Dickens's fiction when the lower orders assumed the shape of Krook and Smallweed, and Thomas Powell, though partly agreeing in 1851 with Phillips's comparison of the real and the artificial, had grave reservations to make about the kind of reality which was portrayed by Dickens. This was hinted at in his contrast between the two novelists :

Both are great observers, but they look different ways. The observation of Thackeray is particular, that of Dickens general; while one is content to regard only the artificial, the other narrowly chronicles the natural.⁷⁹

This accorded exactly with the views of Phillips in his Copperfield and Pendennis review, except for the one word "narrowly", which reflected Powell's feeling that narratives of Cockneys and criminals were, in their way, as limited as stories of Mayfair. "We have a great objection to this eternal painting with mud," he wrote at an earlier point, before proceeding to a statement which contradicted his classification of Dickens's observation as "general". When coarse materials, he thought, formed the staple of an entire work, the novelist was not representing life, but only "a particular phase of it"⁸⁰. A few pages later, Powell complained that when Dickens ventured outside his "Dutch pictures" into "the loftier and more complex phases of human nature", he immediately betrayed that want of universality which rendered him "one of the most one-sided delineators of the human family that ever enjoyed a popular reputation."⁸¹ The word "natural", as applied by this critic to Dickens,

⁷⁹ Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain, p. 105.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁸¹ Ibid., 96.

thus seemed to embrace only brute nature, grovelling in the "mud" and acting by animal impulse. It did not include the soul of man in its elemental flights. More conscious than Thackeray of "general" passions which lay outside the conventions of "artificial" society, Dickens was still only the painter of a "particular" area of life. His interpretation of the world, though perhaps less restrained by custom than his contemporary's, was bounded by a material and finite horizon. He had failed to comprehend man in relation to the universe.

Two later critics accepted more wholeheartedly an opposition between Dickensian generality and Thackerayan interest in purely local social features. The Times, on the occasion of Dickens's death in 1870, probably recalling Phillips's 1851 notice for the same paper, called Thackeray "an able sketcher from artificial types", and compared his characters unfavourably with the "real flesh and blood" figures of his rival, which had been accepted "as the true reflection of human nature, not merely of manners or costume."⁸² An even more appreciative reaction to Dickens came from the Anglo-Indian critic, David Lester Richardson, in his Literary Recreations (1852) :

. . . Dickens' poetical nature takes him into regions of universality. He describes human nature. Thackeray is more at home in describing particular classes He apprehends thoroughly what he actually sees before him, and copies it in colours of reality. He is at home in the accidental or conventional. But Dickens creates characters, and some of them will live for ever. They have the elements of general nature in them. They are not mere transcripts of the life of a particular class, or period, or country.

Thackeray deals chiefly in light satire, - Dickens in humour.⁸³

⁸² Times, 10 June 1870, 9.

⁸³ David Lester Richardson, "Dickens's David Copperfield and Thackeray's Pendennis", Literary Recreations (1852), p.243; apparently reprinted from the Calcutta Quarterly Review (1851?).

Richardson's remark that Dickens created his characters did not mean that they were subjective fantasies spun from their author's active brain, but that they were embodiments of a reality which could not be grasped by the photographer of the commonplace. The historian of social life relied upon his eyes, and his knowledge was experiential. The poet of general nature must employ insight and sympathy, and his knowledge was intuitive. As usual, the truth which universal art mirrored was possibly that of human dignity. Richardson's sudden transition to "satire" in the final sentence above, suggested, as Phillips's use of the same word did, that a preoccupation with social manners was inseparable from a concern with human weakness and vice. Thackeray belittled man, firstly by supposing that he had no identity except that imposed upon him by his accidental position in time and space, and secondly by focussing attention upon the baser and (it was argued) more transient part of his character. Dickens was both more conscious of the essential nature of man, which existed independently from class or country, and more cheerful. It is not, however, clear whether Richardson had Dickens's comic figures in mind as well as his serious ones - his description of the novelist as a humourist would imply that he did. In this case, "the elements of general nature", while they would include the qualities of heroism and goodness, would correspond to the ideas envisaged by Masson and so would impartially include Micawberism as well as the endurance of a Mr. Peggotty or the original virtue of a Nell. Whatever the precise meaning of Richardson's account of Dickens, the difference between Dickens's work and Thackeray's remained clear. One novelist was able to separate from the circumstances which had surrounded them in any particular time or place the characteristics shared by men in all ages, the other understood only the side of human nature which was governed by material conditions.

The opinion of Richardson and Phillips on the relative merits of the two authors was precisely the reverse of that held by James Hannay and John Moore Capes, with which this chapter began. Both sets of critics maintained that the artist was most fittingly engaged on the depiction of general rather than particular traits, but one group argued for the superiority of Thackeray in this respect and the other for that of Dickens. In fact their interpretations of the terms "general" and "particular" would not have been the same, since their attitudes proceeded from diametrically opposed motives. Hannay, Capes and S.F. Williams attacked Dickens because of the individuality of his humorous personages. Their dislike of his work was based on a mistrust of that highly developed selfhood which revealed itself also in his mannerism and in the self-sufficient godlessness of his characters. Thackeray was more true to general human nature because his men and women, while they were individuals, were also recognisable social types, faithful to ordinary experience and in no way unrepresentative of the mass of humanity. Such characters, on the other hand, seemed to Phillips and Richardson - as to Roscoe, Bagehot, Palgrave and Mrs. Oliphant - merely the slaves of externally imposed conventions in a particular society. Reacting against this deterministic outlook - the very reverse of the individualism attributed to Dickens by Hannay, Capes and Williams - these critics supposed that beyond the local and accidental features of life in the material world, which could be

photographed by the realist, there lay an area of essential and universal characteristics which all men had in common and which, as Roscoe said, linked them either to heaven or to hell. Masson, in his own way, also drew a contrast between general and particular, distinguishing the elementalism of epic and drama from the restriction of the novel of social reality, though refusing to state that one was more valid than the other. In the work of Phillips and Masson, the comparison of the artificial and the real, and of the real and the ideal, was a continuation of that between pessimism and optimism, empiricism and faith. While Hannay and Capes took exception to a particularity which, like Mill's "pagan self-assertion", looked back to Romantic individualism, Richardson, Phillips, Masson and F.E.S. were guided by a desire to escape from the entirely different particularity of empirical determinism, which insisted that man was the puppet of whatever society he happened to find himself born into and that he had no wider frame of reference by which to define himself. In the work of these latter critics, the division between optimism and pessimism was extended into that between prosaic realism and a poetic art which either (as for Phillips) dignified the real or (according to Masson) voyaged into the ideal. The romance of reality and pure romance, as was suggested in the first chapter of this work, were more popular than fidelity to life of the kind practiced by Thackeray, just as optimism found more supporters than scepticism.

CHAPTER SIX

DICKENS AND THACKERAY, 1871 - 1922 : CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

With the death of Dickens in 1870 it was to be expected that the habit of placing the two authors in conjunction would be less frequently practiced. As the century drew to its close, new literary debates superseded that between the real and the ideal. The romances of Stevenson, the realistic fiction of Gissing and Moore, the imported naturalism of Zola, de Maupassant and the Goncourts, the dramas of Ibsen, the aestheticism of Wilde and the 90's, involved new creeds and controversies, the impact of which certainly produced a change of attitude towards the great names of the early and mid-Victorian eras. Nevertheless, the Dickens-Thackeray comparison continued to interest more traditionally minded critics - many of whom, of course, were simply mid-Victorians grown older - until the end of the century. Indeed it survived into the twentieth, where, in the hands of Arthur Machen (1902) and G.K. Chesterton (1906), the distinction between poetry and photography, made in the 50's and 60's, was revived, in a different form, under the pressures of a new realism more stringent and more drab than that formerly represented by Thackeray. The purpose of this present chapter is to outline both the survival in the latter decades of the nineteenth century of conventional oppositions, and the influence of new artistic theories upon the practice of considering the novelists side by side.

(1)

Although, as this chapter will later show, the period from 1870 to 1906 saw the beginnings of Thackeray's loss of reputation, it was also

the high point of his fame. Not only was he seen to be holding his place among the leading English novelists, but also to be growing in popularity. A critic in Knowledge, Richard A. Proctor, wrote in 1885: "Of the two writers Thackeray occupies far the higher position. His true place is daily becoming more clearly recognised."¹ The Athenaeum supported this optimistic view of Thackeray's fortunes, claiming in 1879 that: "Thackeray is the only novelist of his time, it may safely be said, whose popularity is increasing. While his rivals are suffering from the reaction that always follows success, he has been steadily gaining ground."² Towards the end of the century, the same magazine, reviewing the Biographical Edition (1898) of Vanity Fair, reiterated its feelings about his continuing appeal: "Thackeray is read, we imagine, to-day almost as widely as he has ever been since the first appearance of 'Vanity Fair' rather more than half a century ago."³ The Academy, on the same day, was even more certain of Thackeray's status: "of the early Victorian reputations, the two which tend to survive, to become classic, are those, firstly, of Thackeray, and secondly of [Charlotte Brontë]."⁴ Among the reputations which this critic suggested had passed away - Bulwer, Trollope, and possibly George Eliot - no mention was made of Dickens. Similarly, the American critic, W.C. Brownell, excluded Dickens from his Victorian Prose Masters of 1901, but devoted his opening chapter to Thackeray, of whom he felt able to say: "The vogue of Thackeray has steadily increased since his death He is already a classic."⁵ The word "classic" was endorsed by W.J. Dawson

¹ "Dickens and Thackeray", Knowledge, 26 June 1885, vii, 538.

² Athenaeum, 20 September 1879, 365.

³ Athenaeum, 30 April 1898, 559.

⁴ "The Reputation of Thackeray", Academy, 30 April 1898, liii, 463.

⁵ Victorian Prose Masters (1902 London ed.), p.3.

in The Makers of English Fiction (1905)⁶, while Frederic Harrison wrote in 1903: "Thackeray is eminently a classic. It is safe to predict that no prose writer of the nineteenth century will retain a more steady, even, and general popularity, and be for ages one of the typical facts in the history of English letters."⁷ Thus, by the middle of the first decade of the new century, at the very moment when he was about to be banished into the wilderness, Thackeray seemed to many readers to be established beyond dispute.

It was widely agreed, however, that his popular fame, as distinct from his critical reputation, could never equal that of Dickens. "Thackeray will probably never be as widely popular as Dickens," wrote R. McWilliam in 1891, "though by a limited class of readers he may be more highly valued."⁸ To the Gentleman's Magazine critic, Henry S. Wilson, in 1886, Thackeray's restriction to a select class was matter for praise. He was "wholly too great for popularity, especially for that immediate reverberation of reputation which is won by some writers whose claim to lasting fame is questionable." Instead, his triumph would be "the slow quiet result of recognition beginning with the cultured and strengthened by criticism"⁹. In the eyes of Wilson, the applause of the masses - he probably intended to imply a comparison with the "immediate" acclaim bestowed upon Dickens in 1836 - was no true guide to artistic merit. Other critics believed that a change in the educational standards of the population at large, raising the mob above their present tastes, would be a prerequisite for the wider appreciation of

⁶ The Makers of English Fiction, p.65.

⁷ "Thackeray" (1903), rptd. Memories and Thoughts (1906), p. 137.

⁸ "Dickens and Thackeray", Longman's Handbook of English Literature (5 vols., 1888 - 90), v, 84.

⁹ "Madame de Florac", Gentleman's Magazine, June 1886, cclx, 575.

so cultivated a novelist as Thackeray. The Dublin Review, in 1871, envisaged this alteration taking place at the expense of Dickens :

"In the time to come, when the classes who are now ill-educated, and who do read Mr. Dickens but do not read Mr. Thackeray, shall be well-educated, they will read both, and reverse the popular verdict."¹⁰

By 1897, Herbert Paul of the Nineteenth Century felt confident in claiming that an improvement in intellectual standards had already benefitted Thackeray: "The great glory of Thackeray is that the spread of education has continually widened the circle of his readers."¹¹

But it was never supposed that his works might achieve a wider currency without the aid of education. All critics were agreed that he could only be enjoyed by the more discerning and critically equipped reader. "Dickens wrote for everyone, Thackeray wrote for the lettered class", declared Paul.

The supremacy of Thackeray among this "lettered class" therefore had little effect on the popularity of Dickens. Clement K. Shorter, writing like Paul in 1897, admitted that :

It is the fashion to call Dickens the novelist of the half-educated the name of William Makepeace Thackeray has entirely eclipsed his in the minds of a certain literary section of the community. Thackeray stands to them for culture, Dickens for illiteracy.¹²

But, Shorter also believed that, in spite of this, the latter was "still beloved by the multitude" and that his audience had "multiplied twofold"¹³,

¹⁰ "Two English Novelists: Dickens and Thackeray", Dublin Review, April 1871, n.s. xvi, 322 - 3.

¹¹ "The Apotheosis of the Novel under Queen Victoria", Nineteenth Century, May 1897, xli, 774.

¹² Victorian Literature : Sixty Years of Books and Bookmen, pp. 43 - 4.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 44, 42.

an assertion which, although unsupported by any concrete evidence, accurately reflected the legendary aura which surrounded Dickens. He was felt to have secured, by his benevolence and humour, a permanent place in the heart of the ordinary Englishman. The qualities of Dickens - "heart . . . mirth . . . observation . . . high spirits . . . loathing of wrong" - would, in the opinion of Andrew Lang, make him for ever "the darling of the English people."¹⁴ Thackeray, said Lang, "wrote, like the mass of authors, for the literary class", whereas : "If ever any man wrote for the people, it was Dickens." Therefore : "We cannot expect for Thackeray, we cannot even desire for him, a popularity like that of Dickens"¹⁵. In the first decade of the new century the situation remained unchanged. "Readers of all classes appreciate Dickens", stated Lewis Melville, "it is rare that an admirer of Thackeray's works is found among the unlettered". He added : "The admirers of Thackeray and the worshippers of Dickens are as a regiment to an army."¹⁶ Not only were the audiences of the two novelists different, but the response to their work also. Dickens was loved and worshipped, Thackeray admired, the old division of heart and head persisting until the comparison ended¹⁷.

Melville's claim that Dickens was read by "all classes" suggests that it was not only the multitude but the critical reader too who continued to find satisfaction in his writings. Though "too gutterly

¹⁴ "Dickens", Essays in Little (1891), p. 131; rptd. from Good Words, April 1888, xxix, 237.

¹⁵ "Thackeray", Essays in Little, p. 116; Good Words, January 1888, 19.

¹⁶ Some Aspects of Thackeray (1911; rptd. from earlier articles), pp. 243 - 4.

¹⁷ Cf. "He worshipped Charles Dickens, honoured Thackeray", Charles L. Reade and the Rev. Compton Reade, Charles Reade, A Memoir (2 vols., 1887), ii, 130.

gutter" for fastidious members of the younger generation, as Andrew Lang sadly reported¹⁸, and in spite of reposing, according to William Samuel Lilly in 1895, "undisturbed on the shelves of libraries in country houses" and never being seen "in the hands of our young men at public schools or universities"¹⁹, Dickens's works, sustained by affection both public and private, were still widely read, at all levels of society. Frederick Locker-Lampson perhaps understated the situation when he wrote :

Perhaps, just now (1883), Thackeray may be a little in the ascendant, especially with the rising generation; but the fashion of things passes away, the ebb and flow of opinion as regards literature is one of its laws. So Dickens will again have his turn²⁰

At least among periodical journalists, Dickens continued, even at the time of this passage, as this chapter will make clear, to "have his turn". At no time did he fall into oblivion, whatever the standing of Thackeray.

(11)

The reasons advanced during this period for the superiority of Thackeray over Dickens were often exactly the same as those of the mid-Victorian era. He was still, for example, accounted the better stylist. Anthony Trollope wrote in his Autobiography (1883) :

Of Dickens's style it is impossible to speak in praise. It is jerky, ungrammatical, and created by himself in defiance of rules No young novelist should ever dare to imitate the style of Dickens. If such a one wants a model for his language, let him take Thackeray.²¹

Trollope was still inhabiting a world of classical authority, where

¹⁸ "Phiz", Lost Leaders (1892), p. 126.

¹⁹ Four English Humourists of the Nineteenth Century, p. 32.

²⁰ My Confidences (1896), p. 330.

²¹ An Autobiography, Ch. xiii (World's Classics, Oxford, 1947), p. 227.

writers formed a style by adherence to "rules" and by imitation of great men, not under pressure from the inward necessity of their personal vision. There existed an abstract entity called "style" which took precedence over all personal tastes and whims. Clearly, Thackeray, as an educated man, would be in a better position than Dickens to absorb the tradition. Nor could such an untutored writer as Dickens be expected to create a texture of classical and literary allusion. "The charm of association is entirely wanting in Mr. Dickens's works"²², commented the Dublin Review in 1871, in explanation of Thackeray's greater appeal for the educated reader. Even so sympathetic a Dickensian as Andrew Lang implied that Thackeray's class and education had assisted him in the cultivation of perfect style :

Thackeray writes like a scholar, not in the narrow sense, but rather as a student and a master of all the refinements and resources of language. Dickens copies the chaff of the street, or he roams into melodramatic, "drops into poetry" - blank verse at least - and touches all with peculiarities, we might say mannerisms, of his own.²³

This contrast was in part one of class and education. Thackeray wrote with the cultured ease of a gentleman, obedient to established standards, while Dickens drew on the lower classes and the London theatre for his means of expression. At the same time there lingered in Lang's comparison elements of the mid-Victorian distinction between purity of diction and self-consciousness. Both he and Trollope remarked on the highly individual nature of Dickens's language, though the word "mannerism", reiterated for thirty or forty years, had doubtless become something of a cliché by the 80's and 90's, used because it was traditionally associated with Dickens, rather than because it held any deep-rooted significance for

²² Dublin Review, April 1871, n.s. xvi, 323.

²³ "Thackeray", Essays in Little, p. 106; Good Words, January 1888, 15.

Lang as an upholder of objective moral truth. The Ruskinian background to the term, never explicit in Victorian criticism, was by this time probably an even more shadowy influence.

As in the mid-Victorian period, the restraint of Thackeray's style continued to be paralleled, for some critics, by the quiet realism of his pathos. Lang could not allow Dickens's "conscious pathos"²⁴ to be the equal of his humour: "One still laughs as heartily as ever with Dick Swiveller; but who can cry over Little Nell?" Such "gloating over a child's death-bed" compared unfavourably with the true sentiment of Colonel Newcome's "Adsum" or of "the diary of Clare Doria Forey" in Richard Feverel²⁵. Lang regarded Thackeray's treatment of Colonel Newcome as the embodiment of genuine unpretentious feeling. In Dickens's pathos, he obviously felt, there were traces both of theatricality and of morbidity. Other critics found it no less excessive. A.B. DeMille, in his Literature in the Century (1900), commented :

Of the two Thackeray possessed the truer poise; his fine taste never over-steps the bounds of due reticence; and thus it is that his pathos is far more real than that of Dickens. Witness the death of Colonel Newcome, for one example. The pathos never verges to the least degree upon the fatal borders of gush²⁶

Later literary historians agreed with this estimate. Dickens's sentiment, said W.J. Dawson in 1905, was artificial and melodramatic, whereas Thackeray's showed "no striving after effect" and was "quite effortless, but as potent as Nature herself."²⁷ Harold Williams, in 1911, felt that Thackeray's pathos emerged naturally from events like that of "the work-a-day world", Dickens's was studiously prepared for : "He does not throw

²⁴ Lost Leaders, p.126.

²⁵ Letters to Dead Authors (1886), pp. 17-18.

²⁶ Literature in the Century, pp. 185-6.

²⁷ The Makers of English Fiction, p. 83.

away his opportunity at a deathbed, and elaborates to satiety a scene which Thackeray would have dismissed in a sentence, moving us more deeply."²⁸ In spite of a distance of over half a century these judgments in no respect differed from those made by the first critics of Vanity Fair, except that the element of self-display, which had caused some Victorian reviewers to condemn Dickens's pathos, was less in evidence. It was the excessive quality of his emotionalism that was in question rather than his showmanship.

Thackeray's fidelity to the operations of nature was apparent also in his treatment of character. Even if Dickens was, as G.B. Smith supposed in an Edinburgh Review article of 1873, true to life (or at least to the lower-class portion of it), yet his truth lay only on the surface: "Thackeray takes us below the surface"²⁹. This keener insight into motivation was also noted by Amelia B. Edwards in the Contemporary Review of 1894, but for her Dickens's characters were completely unrealistic:

Dickens was essentially a caricaturist. Trollope was an admirable portrait-painter. Thackeray was a clairvoyant. Or, to put it differently, Dickens depicted his fellow-men as they are not: Trollope presents them as they appear to the world; Thackeray reads them through and through.³⁰

Thackeray, this critic continued, possessed "the inmost secret of the art of the novelist, sincerity." No story-teller could make his readers believe in characters in whom he did not believe himself³¹. Dickens, presumably, did not have this genuine faith and so produced only incredible

²⁸ Two Centuries of the English Novel, pp. 188 - 9.

²⁹ "The Works of Thackeray", Edinburgh Review, January 1873, cxxxvii, 116.

³⁰ "The Art of the Novelist", Contemporary Review, August 1894, lxvi, 236 - 7.

³¹ Ibid., 239.

caricatures. Trollope, though able to create belief in the minds of his readers, was true (as had often been said of Thackeray) to accidental characteristics alone. Only Thackeray rendered his personages credible by representing their internal as well as their external qualities, and this he was able to do because he had fully entered into their identities. A similar point was made in 1885 by Richard Proctor in Knowledge, who accused Dickens of not living among his characters. Had he done so, he would never have been able to alter their final fate at the suggestion of friends. Thackeray, by contrast, never made his figures incongruous or departed "from that natural sequence of events which the development of his stories . . . suggested to him."³² By virtue of knowing his characters thoroughly, he never lost sight of the action which would arise naturally out of their personalities. There was no question of his allowing outside influences to affect the integrity of a work. Nor had he attempted, as Dickens had, to impose an artificial form upon life by "the construction of an attractive plot, after the old-fashioned manner". Instead of ending his novels with a marriage, and showing virtue rewarded and vice punished, he attempted simply to give "pictures from real life"³³. His fictions, since they were "slices from real life", did not come to a neat conclusion, because "real life" moved "ever onward"³⁴. In his refusal to interfere

³² Knowledge, 26 June 1885, vii, 538.

³³ Ibid., 12 June 1885, 493.

³⁴ Ibid., 26 June 1885, 538. Thackeray's avoidance of endings, as a means of furthering the illusion of reality, had often been noted in the mid-Victorian era, but no comparison had been made with Dickens, whose work was in general regarded as equally careless of structural principles (see above, p.208), and continued to be treated as formless in the latter decades of the century. The general view of both novelists was summed up by the Dublin Review: "Neither Mr. Thackeray nor Mr. Dickens excelled in the construction of plots" (April 1871, n.s.xvi,341).

with experience he revealed himself as a completely objective observer whose only concern was with the reflection of truth. Very slightly, in his anxiety over the integrity of character and narrative - its freedom to develop according to its own inherent nature rather than in accordance with external demands - this critic inclined more to Taine's view of the artist³⁵ than to Ruskin's.

Amelia Edward's theory of artistic love, on the other hand, was totally Ruskinian. In spite of her praise for Thackeray's ability to read men "through and through", which seemed to endorse his motive-seeking activities, she also found it necessary to force him into the moral mould, claiming that the art of the story-teller had always gone "hand in hand with honour and valour and greatness of soul" and that Thackeray, in his appreciation of "the sanctity of love, of honour, of truth", had nobly upheld this tradition³⁶. The sympathy which she attributed to the novelist would thus appear to have been that of the "open, loving heart", and his merits those ascribed by other critics to Dickens. Her remarks make it clear that all who admired Thackeray, or praised him as a realist, did not necessarily do so entirely because they respected him for presenting an uncompromising account of human nature. Sir Algernon West, who thought him "the greatest novelist of any that I have ever read", did so partly from delight in seeing the world he himself had known reproduced in the pages of a book, but largely because he so often found himself shedding a manly tear over "pictures of noble generosity . . . kind acts . . . lofty hopes and profound belief"³⁷, features which earlier critics had not often found in Thackeray's work. To the Scottish Review, in 1883, the very truth to life of Thackeray's

³⁵ See above, pp. 54 - 5.

³⁶ Contemporary Review, 226, 239.

³⁷ Recollections, 1832 - 86 (2 vols., 2nd ed., 1899), i, 99.

characters was an indication of his moral soundness: "there is not one character perhaps in Dickens that a practical man could hope to take as an example. He has not created one hero or heroine. Thackeray's characters are flesh and blood, Dickens's are phantoms."³⁸ Realism, still naively equated with descriptions of familiar objects and persons, was chiefly useful as a didactic weapon. Lessons could more easily be inculcated through personages in whom the reader could see a direct resemblance to himself - exactly the opposite assumption to that made by those critics who sighed for a return to the clear-cut moral distinctions of romance. Thackeray came nearer, in this critic's view, to the realities of present duty, while, for Algernon West, he was a figure of loving kindness. Both of these writers invoked traditional Victorian values, showing no willingness to accept Thackeray's exposure of human behaviour.

In the Academy of 1898, on the other hand, a more "modern" attitude was adopted:

In many respects Thackeray makes a greater appeal to the modern mind than he did to the first generation of his readers in how many ways must not the author of Vanity Fair have knocked up against the prejudices of an age whose ideals of fiction were founded upon the romance of Scott and the sentimentality of Dickens? For, since the tradition of Jane Austen had faded away, Thackeray was the first of the realists; and our mothers fought a little shy of realism: the best of them were idealists, and the bulk were sentimentalists.³⁹

The same critic declared:

largely owing to Thackeray himself, literary ideals have changed. We no longer fear to look on things as they are,

³⁸ "Charles Dickens", Scottish Review, December 1883, iii, 146.

³⁹ Academy, 30 April 1898, liii, 463.

no longer wish them enveloped in the sentimentalist's rosy mist. And, therefore, Thackeray's realism no longer offends: he speaks to us with our own tongue. If anything has lost savour, it is rather the moments when he, too, appears to approach the sentimental⁴⁰

It is not clear from these passages whether the realism with which Thackeray was credited included his dissection of motive. The reference to Jane Austen was more in keeping with a definition which embraced simply fidelity to everyday experience, although the fact that earlier readers had disliked Thackeray's truth to life seemed to suggest that his work contained elements of the unpleasant. In the age of Moore, Gissing and Zola, the "morbid anatomy" of the earlier novelist would certainly no longer seem so harsh. A complete reversal of values was evident in the repudiation of sentiment, though there was no improvement in critical perception. The Victorians had accused Thackeray of cynicism, the moderns were to damn him as a sentimentalist, neither group recognising that the most characteristic feature of his work was its mixture of sarcasm and emotion, each qualifying the other and so closely connected that it was impossible to separate them. Interpretation of his work was to be as one-sided as before, notwithstanding changes in the literary climate.

Though this particular passage offered a new viewpoint, it seems evident from the remarks of other critics quoted in this section that very little was added to the Dickens-Thackeray opposition in the forty years following Dickens's death (or, for that matter, to criticism of either novelist considered in isolation). This is only partly true, since new treatments of the comparison were made, but it is largely true at the level of periodical journalism, and of literary histories. Old opinions, deprived of much of the force which had once animated them,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 464.

were reiterated as standard observations. Magazine articles on the two novelists, which had never reached very impressive heights in the 50's and 60's, grew even less adventurous from the 70's onwards, while the various histories of English literature and of the novel, which began to appear towards the end of the Victorian period, by providing potted versions of accepted judgements, added to the general impression of dreary stagnation. In spite of the fairly large number of contrasts drawn between Dickens and Thackeray in this period, there was ample proof that the traditional comparison no longer possessed vital reference to the issues of the day. But in several articles, discussed in the following section, it retained something of its old life, though the fact that all these essays were published in the 70's and early 80's merely confirms that, as the century drew nearer to its close, interest in the polarity of Dickens and Thackeray declined.

(iii)

In his Life of Dickens (1871 - 73), John Forster attacked Lewes and Taine for "conceding the great effects achieved by the writer, but disputing the quality and value of his art."⁴¹ In the final year of the century, Alice Meynell noted disapprovingly the continuance of this same phenomenon :

Men still have the habit of saving their reputation as critics by disavowing the literature of Dickens, even while they confess the amplitude of its effects. There is laughter for his humour, tears for his pathos, praise for his spirit, and contempt for his authorship. The least every man holds himself bound to say is that he

⁴¹ The Life of Charles Dickens (ed. J.W. Ley, 1928), p. 716.

need not say he prefers Thackeray.⁴²

As Forster and Meynell both remarked, critics found that, though Dickens maintained a strong hold over their hearts, he did not appeal to their minds by intellectual ability or technical mastery. Similarly, however, they discovered that while Thackeray spoke to their minds he did not fulfil the needs of the heart. Thus, even if they did say that they preferred Thackeray, they always returned to his rival for emotional satisfaction. Neither novelist could offer total fulfilment. This gave renewed energy to the comparison between them, since they continued to represent opposed parts of the individual consciousness, heart and head.

This suspension between contraries marked the 1871 essay on the two novelists in the Dublin Review. The humour of Dickens, "which simply amuses, which is merely quite delightful", was set beside that of his contemporary, which involved "profound intellectual satisfaction" because of the reader's recognition of "the truth of his delineations". This seemed to indicate a preference for Thackeray, on the grounds of his greater seriousness, but immediately the statement had to be qualified. His humour, continued the critic, "has, for all its power and extent, such a monotonous refrain, that it does not rest or refresh" :

It taxes the mind, and while we recognize the great gift, and its cultivated and lavish use, it no more cheers one's spirits or turns one's thoughts out of a work-a-day groove than a comedy of Molière does.

Dickens's taste for oddities, on the other hand, gave "relief" from life's "weariness"⁴³. Intellect had its limitations, at least in the work of the cynical Thackeray, while Dickens's high spirits, for all their superficiality, liberated the heart. The Dublin reviewer could

⁴² "Charles Dickens as a Writer", Pall Mall Gazette, 11 January 1899, lxviii, 3.

⁴³ Dublin Review, April 1871, n.s. xvi, 325.

give his allegiance to neither author. He could merely balance one against the other.

The same divided response was evinced by a writer for the New Monthly Magazine in 1875, who, in an essay on Dickens, declared that the novelist did not possess that "grasp of his subjects, and complete mastery of them" which distinguished both Scott and Thackeray :

In his knowledge of varieties of manners, of types of character, of human nature, [he] fell below his two predecessors, in the same walk of literature. Dickens was wanting in their precision of thought and command of language; he had not their clearness of vision, their concentration of purpose directed to one grand object. ⁴⁴

This verdict was repeated in the same critic's article on Thackeray, which followed immediately:

In marked contrast to Dickens's kindly works are those of Thackeray. There can be no question that the latter's genius greatly surpassed that of the former. Thackeray, too, was much better informed, moved in a higher social circle, had seen more of the manners and customs of different nations, had a keener insight into human nature, was less prone to run into caricature. ⁴⁵

After these appreciative comments on Thackeray there followed the inevitable change in direction: "But in Thackeray there is much undisguised cynicism". He did not "lead the thoughts upwards so that good is insensibly done", and in this he was clearly inferior to Dickens :

Thackeray was, it may be argued, truer to the infirmities and meannesses of human nature than Dickens. His characters may be more perfect, because more like real life; they arouse our sympathy less powerfully than do his,

⁴⁴ "Dickens", New Monthly Magazine, September 1875, viii, 276. This critic was, of course, inaccurate in calling Thackeray one of Dickens's "predecessors".

⁴⁵ "Thackeray, ibid., 277.

because more truthful reflections of what we
daily and hourly see around.⁴⁶

Thackeray's merits, it was evident, were not sufficient to give him unrivalled supremacy. He possessed a finer style and a more penetrating knowledge of character, both deriving from his social advantages over Dickens, but he did not command love, though he earned the greatest respect. Dickens, whose lack of understanding of man and society was traceable to his want of birth and education, had never undergone the process of self-cultivation which had formed the gentlemanly Scott and Thackeray, both as men and as artists. Yet he could weave a spell over even the intelligent reader because he was endowed with the gift of being able to excite "sympathy". Finally, the New Monthly critic was compelled to bring Dickens and Thackeray together as complementary half-men rather than mutually exclusive opposites: "Thackeray completes Dickens. The former gives human nature with few redeeming features. The latter omits the dark shadows, and paints everything with the bright colours of the rainbow. The one corrects the other."⁴⁷ Neither novelist could therefore exist, at least in the consciousness of this writer, without the other. They embodied conflicting but equally valid views of humanity, which must somehow be brought together by the man who would see life as a whole. Optimism must be qualified by scepticism, the heart by the head, but the reconciliation was an uneasy one.

The dramatic critic of the Times, Mowbray Morris, in an article on Dickens for the Fortnightly Review in 1882, was similarly unable to choose between the novelists, though for him Thackeray's intellect took the shape of technical skill rather than pessimism. In treating Dickens's

⁴⁶ Ibid., 277-8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 278.

position as "artist", evaluating "the quality of his workmanship" and considering him "architectonically", he was "inevitably" reminded of the greater capacities of Thackeray in this respect. Then followed a passage of shifting viewpoints, as Morris moved from side to side in indecision:

Profound as is my admiration for Thackeray, and ever fresh the pleasure with which I go back again and again to his writings, it seems to me impossible to deny that Dickens was the more abundantly gifted of the two; he had, I mean, a larger proportion of the gifts which go to make the writer of fiction, and those [which] he had in which the other was wanting, or possessed, at least, in a less degree, are precisely those which commend themselves most immediately and vividly to the majority of readers, which take soonest hold of the popular imagination and sympathy, and keep them longest. But the true artist's touch, the sense of limitation, of symmetry, the self-control, the sure perception, in a word, of the exact moment when "the rest should be silence," which so powerfully impresses us in Thackeray's best work . . . we never, or hardly ever, find in Dickens. And is it not by this quality, in this secret of consummate workmanship, that the novelist has, after all, the best chance of surviving . . . ?⁴⁸

The qualities which Morris here ascribed to Thackeray substantially corresponded to those described by the New Monthly writer. Both critics agreed on the novelist's self-control and direction of his talents to one fixed purpose. That the "gifts" which Dickens, according to Morris, had received in richer measure than his contemporary, included the "sympathy" praised by the earlier essayist was further apparent from Morris's later exclamation: "But who would speak harshly of Dickens, of that 'soul of good-nature and kindness!'"⁴⁹ In the

⁴⁸ "Charles Dickens", Fortnightly Review, 1 December 1882, n.s.xxxii, o.s. xxxviii, 768.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 773.

passage quoted above, Morris veered between intellect and emotion, between his responsibilities as a critic and his feelings as a man. He was unable to decide what constituted a great work of art. Was it those qualities of "imagination and sympathy" by which the uncritical "majority of readers" (with whom, to begin with, he identified himself) judged a novel's effectiveness, or the assured artistry which could perhaps be appreciated by a select few? Morris felt obliged as a man of letters to state finally - but only tentatively - that "consummate workmanship" was the prime requisite, but he also knew that he derived greater emotional fulfilment from work which was less perfect and more obviously human. Powerless to unite "art" and "effects" in one author, he hovered between two and drifted into inconclusion. Had Thackeray been more good-natured, or Dickens more of an artist, his problem would have been resolved.

The same kind of uncertainty was evident in the reactions of G.H. Lewes. As Forster's attack in the Life indicated, Lewes was the most glaring example in England of the critic who attempted to divorce Dickens's "effects" from "art". Puzzled by the apparent discrepancy between the crudeness of the novelist's technique and the undoubted appeal which his work had even for the cultivated reader, Lewes devoted his 1872 Fortnightly Review paper, "Dickens in Relation to Criticism", to explaining why an author whom critics rated so lowly could yet so powerfully move all sections of the public, critics included. The real but unconfessed purpose of the essay was one of self-examination. Lewes wanted to discover, and rationalise, the reasons for his own guilty enjoyment of this low-brow entertainer. He first had recourse to his celebrated theory of hallucination, which enabled him to avoid any compromise of his intellectual status at the level of waking consciousness:

When he imagined a street, a house, a room, a figure, he saw it . . . in the sharp definition of actual perception, all the salient details obtruding themselves on his attention So definite and insistent was the image, that even while knowing it was false we could not help, for a moment, being affected, as it were, by his hallucination.⁵⁰

Momentarily suspending disbelief under the spell of the non-realistic Dickens world, Lewes was irritated to find that he could accept persons and situations which his reason told him were "false". Positing the idea of hallucinatory participation in the author's land of dreams, he absolved himself from all serious responsibility for the temporary abnegation of his more intelligent self. He was almost, in fact, setting up a new dichotomy, between the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind, but this was an aspect of Dickens criticism which was only fully developed in the twentieth century. By discussing Dickens's vision as a hallucination, Lewes sought to minimise its importance.

No doubt, in forming this explanation of Dickens's power over the reader, Lewes had in mind primarily the grotesque side of the novelist's art. Susceptibility to the gentler Dickens was more easily accounted for:

. . . Dickens's figures are brought within the range of the reader's interests, and receive from these interests a sudden illumination, when they are the puppets of a drama every incident of which appeals to the sympathies. With a fine felicity of instinct he seized upon situations having an irresistible hold over the domestic affections and ordinary sympathies even critical spectators who complained that these broadly painted pictures were artistic daubs, could not wholly resist their effective suggestiveness.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Fortnightly Review, 1 February 1872, n.s. xi, o.s. xvii, 145.

⁵¹ Ibid., 146 - 7.

Obviously, Lewes would have had to number himself among these "critical spectators", on both counts. A few pages later he returned to the same point, remarking that all men were moved "by pictures of common suffering and common joy", and would respond emotionally to any author who could paint such subjects:

That Dickens had this skill is undisputed; and if critical reflection shows that the means he employs are not such as will satisfy the technical estimate, and consequently that the pictures will not move the cultivated mind . . . we must still remember that . . . it requires prodigious force and rare skill to impress images that will stir the universal heart The cultivated and uncultivated were affected by [his talents] .⁵²

Lewes appeared to contradict himself here, first claiming that Dickens could not move the educated reader, then admitting that he affected all men alike. However, a distinction should be drawn between "mind" (or head) and "heart", the one easily impressed by achievements which the other declared second-rate. It was only on the lower level, common to all, that the man of taste and discernment was conquered. But this only served to emphasise the existence of division in the critical consciousness. Refusing to acknowledge the presence in Dickens's work of any technical merit - though in the passage above he did concede the novelist's "rare skill" - Lewes was hopelessly torn between "cultivated" and "uncultivated" responses. Indulging his sentiments on the one hand, he must deliver a reasoned and unfavourable judgement on the other. He knew that Dickens offered him emotional satisfaction beyond the range of other writers, and yet he believed that these others gave a more truthful picture of life and were more intellectually and artistically accomplished : "Compared with that of Fielding or Thackeray, his was

⁵² Ibid., 150 - 1.

merely an animal intelligence, i.e. restricted to perceptions."⁵³

Yet it was of Dickens that he chose to write, not Thackeray, for the less sophisticated author offered a challenge to him which he had to take up. As a thinking man, he ought to prefer Thackeray, but he could never escape from the emotional needs which were met by Dickens, and so his final words upon the latter were ones which stated but did not resolve the dichotomy of intellect and feeling : "For the reader of cultivated taste there is little in his works beyond the stirring of their emotions - but what a large exception!"⁵⁴

One critic who was prepared to let his "emotions" outweigh his "cultivated taste" was Robert Buchanan, best known for his attack on the Pre-Raphaelites in "The Fleshly School of Poetry" (1871). Writing in the same month that Lewes's essay appeared, Buchanan exalted the imaginative aspects of Dickens's work in a manner anticipating that of Chesterton: "He was the creator of Human Fairyland. He was a magician, to be bound by none of your commonplace laws and regular notions"⁵⁵. That there were glaring faults in the Dickens world Buchanan admitted, but the delight to be extracted from it made him reluctant to dwell upon these :

We know well enough . . . that it contains much sham pathos, atrocious bits of psychological bungling, a little fine writing, and a thimbleful of twaddle; we know . . . that it is peopled, not quite by human beings, but by Ogres, Monsters, Giants, Elves, Phantoms, Fairies, Demons, and Will-o'-the-Wisps For that diviner oddity, which revels in the Incongruity of the very Universe itself, which penetrates to the spheres and makes the very Angel of Death share in the wonderful laughter, we must go

⁵³ Ibid., 151.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁵ "The 'Good Genie' of Fiction", St. Paul's Magazine, February 1872, x, 133.

elsewhere - say to Jean Paul. Of the Satire, which illuminates the inside of Life and reveals the secret beating of the heart, which unmasks the Beautiful and anatomizes the Ugly, Thackeray is a greater master; and his tears, when they do flow, are truer tears. But for mere magic, for simple delightfulness, commend us to our good Genie [who] when most needed . . . brightened all life, and transformed this awful London of ours - with its startling facts and awful daily phenomena - into a gigantic Castle of Dream.⁵⁶

Like earlier critics who had allowed themselves to succumb to the charms of Dickensian fairyland, Buchanan found nothing in the non-realism of this art other than entertainment and escapism. To read a story by Dickens was to be treated to a transformation of harsh actuality into romantic dream. No serious conclusions about human nature could be drawn from such "magic" and "delightfulness". The work of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter was more cosmic, the fiction of Thackeray more subtle and psychological. Thackeray had too the advantage of avoiding "sham pathos". But, unlike earlier critics, Buchanan was prepared openly to admit that he felt the need for sheer fantasy as a refuge from the drabness and the horrors of nineteenth century London. He did not, however, follow Alfred Austin in treating non-realistic art as the highest type. The anatomising practiced by Thackeray, which Austin would have distrusted as scientific, was accepted as perfectly valid by Buchanan, and indeed as more relevant to human experience. The two authors were so entirely different that they inhabited separate parts of the consciousness, the heart and the mind, each of which had its due time of operation. Thus, while implicitly acknowledging a division of the kind evident in Lewes's article, Buchanan, perhaps as the result of lesser sensitivity, was not prey to the uncertainties which beset the other writer.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 147 - 8.

In the work of Lewes and other critics discussed in this section, the relationship between the Dickens-Thackeray comparison and the Victorian conflict of emotion and intellect, though not commented upon by the writers themselves, was actually more obvious than in the 50's and 60's. The New Monthly Magazine's declaration, "Thackeray completes Dickens", was a clearer statement of their interrelationship, as head and heart, than any made in the mid-Victorian epoch. At the same time the attitudes of a bookman such as Andrew Lang, in the late 80's, indicated that this aspect of the opposition was of diminishing importance. The two novelists certainly existed side by side in Lang's consciousness, but rather because he regarded them both in an equally emotional light, than because he saw in one the embodiment of feeling and in the other the disciple of science. He delighted in them as creators of a gallery of immortal characters who left "happy memories" in the reader's mind⁵⁷, and although he recognised the continuing life of the comparison for other men he found that for him it had little personal significance :

every Englishman who reads may be said to be a partisan of [Mr. Dickens] or of Mr. Thackeray. Why should there be any partisanship in the matter; and why, having two such good things . . . should we not be silently happy in the possession? . . . I take no side, and attempt to enjoy the best of both.⁵⁸

Lang at least was completely free from the inconsistencies which troubled other writers in their discussion of the novelists' relative merits, but this in itself was a sign of the deficiencies of his criticism. His ability to enjoy both authors alike - which, said Lewis Melville, made him "a notable exception" to the general rule⁵⁹ - was only possible

⁵⁷ "Thackeray", Essays in Little (1891), p.113; Good Words, January 1888, 18.

⁵⁸ Letters to Dead Authors (1886), pp. 10 - 11.

⁵⁹ Some Aspects of Thackeray (1911), p. 243.

because of the vague emotionalism with which he regarded them. His essays made no pretence at original insight, but were merely the fond musings of the bookman - that essentially late nineteenth century figure - over the contents of his library. Such writing was of no literary value, and lacked completely the sense of mental activity which characterised the articles of those to whom Dickens and Thackeray were still diametrically opposed antagonists, neither of whom could supply a totally balanced picture of life. The shifting viewpoints of these earlier critics gave to their work a vitality which Lang's was far from possessing.

(iv)

As the passages already quoted from the Dublin Review in 1871 and the New Monthly Magazine of 1875 have shown, Thackeray was still regarded as a cynic, the opinion of him as a novelist who belittled human nature persisting until the end of the century. In the 70's this traditional position was held by his old friend, Edward FitzGerald, who had never been a great admirer of Vanity Fair or Pendennis. In 1850, he had written: "His Pendennis is very stupid, I think: Dickens's Copperfield on the whole, very good. He always lights one up somehow."⁶⁰ After Thackeray's death a wave of nostalgia for the days of his youth had kindled in FitzGerald a new regard for the works of the man whose living voice he would never hear again, and, as late as 1872, he could write appreciatively of "Thackeray's monumental Figures of 'pauvre et triste Humanité' . . . Humanity in its Depths, not in its superficial Appearances."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Letter to F. Tennyson, 7 March 1850, Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald (7 vols., 1902), 1, 292.

⁶¹ To Miss Anne Biddell, 22 February 1872, ibid., iii, 17.

This accorded with the pessimism of the Rubaiyát, but, two years later, his mood had once more changed: "I have been sunning myself in Dickens I must look on Dickens as a mighty Benefactor to Mankind."⁶²

By 1879, Dickens, in a famous remark, had become "a little Shakespeare - a Cockney Shakespeare, if you will", and had again taken precedence over Thackeray: "had I to choose but one of them, I would choose Dickens' hundred delightful Caricatures rather than Thackeray's half-dozen terrible Photographs."⁶³ Dickens's fertile fancy was infinitely more attractive than Thackeray's narrow and cynical insistence upon those local and material features of life - the exact opposite of the "Depths" which, a few years before, had supposedly formed his subject-matter - which could be captured by the lens of the social photographer. Two months after this, Thackeray's works had apparently been placed on the shelf for good, while Dickens was still undergoing a process of re-reading which seems to have stretched over a period of years during the latter half of the 70's: "am now with Dickens, who delights me almost as much [as Scott] in a very different way. I cannot revert to Thackeray: he is too melancholy and saturnine: we are old enough to prefer the sunny side of the wall now."⁶⁴ Approaching death, FitzGerald took the brightest available view of the human condition, returning to his former mistrust of Thackeray's scepticism. In the letters of this member of an older generation, the comparison, as might be expected, retained its traditional polarity.

In the 80's, W.E. Henley, an ardent Dickensian, was another who evinced distaste for Thackeray's account of mankind :

⁶² To Fanny Kemble, 24 August 1874, ibid., 128.

⁶³ To the same, 25 April 1879, ibid., iv, 51.

⁶⁴ To F. Tennyson, 21 June 1879, ibid., 69.

Esmond apart, there is scarcely a man or a woman in Thackeray's works whom it is possible to love unreservedly or to thoroughly respect. That gives the measure of the man, and determines the quality of his influence.⁶⁵

Later critics, who held no brief at all for Dickens, were similarly distressed by Thackeray's dark interpretation of life. In the mid-90's, Frederic Harrison echoed Henley's judgement :

in all these twenty-six volumes and hundreds of men and women portrayed, there is not one man or one woman having at once a noble character, perfect generosity, powerful mind, and loveable nature; not one man or one woman of tender heart and perfect honour, but has some trait that tends to make him or her either laughable or tedious. It is not so with the supreme masters of the human heart.⁶⁶

In the same year that this verdict was published in Harrison's Studies in Early Victorian Literature (1895), there also appeared a new volume on Thackeray by Adolphus A. Jack, in which the charge of cynicism was brought once more. Jack, for instance, complained that: "The company brought together in 'Vanity Fair' is an outrage on the constitution of the world."⁶⁷ The old belief that an artist must mirror the world in its entirety still persisted, kept afloat by the desire to see in fiction images of human goodness and heroism which, it was argued, must be included in any novel purporting to reflect the whole range of human

⁶⁵ Athenaeum, 12 November 1881, 624; rptd. Views and Reviews (1890), p.15. Ostensibly, Henley was reporting, at this point in his essay, the opinions of Thackeray's detractors; but his tone throughout left little doubt that he was in agreement.

⁶⁶ Studies in Early Victorian Literature (1895), pp. 132 - 3; rptd. from the Forum (New York) of the previous year.

⁶⁷ Thackeray. A Study (1895), p. 189.

experience.

Two years after the books of Harrison and Jack, the comparison between Dickens and Thackeray as exemplars of optimism and pessimism, love and knowledge, faith and science, was stated for the last time in Victorian criticism. Ironically, this was the first occasion on which any effort was made to see in the conventional opposition a reflection of larger divisions within the century itself. Looking back to the dawn of the century, Dr. Montagu Griffin, in the Irish Monthly of 1897, recalled that: "The influx of the tide of Democracy into England, together with that of the critical movement in Germany, subsequent to the French Revolution, worked a sudden change in the history of English Literature." Producing first the democratic genius of Wordsworth and Coleridge on the one hand, and the critical spirit of Byron and Shelley on the other, this dual influence had later revealed itself in fiction, in the persons of Charles Dickens, "the philanthropist, the ardent and expansive lover of men, women, and children", and William Makepeace Thackeray, "the cynic, the satirist . . . wholly devoted to censuring mankind in general"⁶⁸.

Griffin proceeded to develop this distinction between the two novelists :

Herein lies the contrast: Dickens is an idealist, a man who believes in the highest possibilities for his fellowmen; his highest philosopher may be a pedlar, like Wordsworth's, or his greatest hero [Sidney Carton] may be a drunkard; given the divine flame of charity and of love, and there is no height to which a man may not attain. Thackeray is a cynic, a searcher into motives, a critic of human actions, who would often fain rob them of their nobility by referring them to ugly sources His books are the Etiology and Pathology of moral diseases; and his instruments of demonstration are the scalpel, and the microscope.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ "A Study of Thackeray", Irish Monthly, January 1897, xxv, 27 - 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 28 - 29.

This passage provides a perfect summary of certain Victorian attitudes. Griffin, standing at the very end of an era, saw more clearly than had perhaps been possible for the mid-Victorians, the kind of significance which the antagonism of Dickens and Thackeray had held in the context of nineteenth century thought, though he did not fully bring out the background to the latter novelist's work. The difference between the two writers which he observed was actually closer to that between Wordsworth and Bentham than to that between Wordsworth and Byron, but the similarity of the Benthamite philosophy to Thackeray's discovery of self-interested "motives" at the root of all behaviour remained always below the surface in Victorian criticism, implicit in the phrasedology applied to his methods, but never openly stated. The association of his work with the empiricist and anatomical tendencies which the Victorians had learned to distrust was latent in the same way in Griffin's essay, even though it was not made explicit. Wordsworthian trust in "Worth in low places" was offset by Benthamite analysis of evil in good. Griffin, however, was not far enough removed from the mid-Victorian period to see that the establishment of a comparison between the two novelists had itself sprung from the existence within the consciousness of critics of a tension between faith in human nature and doubt. Nor was he himself able to regard the conventional contrast with objectivity. He followed his predecessors in approving more of one author than of the other. Charity and love were more to his taste than the explorations of the motive-seeker and the instruments of the dissector.

This article represented the virtual end of the Victorian approach to comparisons of Dickens and Thackeray, though, as this chapter has occasionally shown, traditional attitudes naturally survived into the early years of the twentieth century. In spite of the supposed reaction against Dickens and in favour of Thackeray in the latter decades of the

century, it is evident that Dickens still excited much interest during these years. He continued to be read and enjoyed even by those critics who felt that they owed a duty to the greater intellectualism of Thackeray, while by Griffin and FitzGerald he was openly preferred. At the same time that his artistic mastery was disputed, his appeal to the affections kept him alive in men's hearts, and his sympathy remained a necessary counterbalance to the sterner outlook of his contemporary. Moreover, within a few years of Griffin's article, Dickens's cause was to receive the support of Arthur Machen and G.K. Chesterton, both of whom were to make repeated use of the contrast with Thackeray, to the latter's disfavour. The comparison, like Dickens, was as yet far from dead. But in the writings of Chesterton and Machen, though many of the points made arose out of the attitudes of the previous century, the world-view which supported them would not have been possible for Victorian critics. In the work of George Gissing too the opposition of the two novelists was to serve a purpose totally hostile to the Victorian outlook. Chesterton and Gissing came at the beginning of new developments in the criticism of fiction. Griffin, therefore, stood as the last exponent of an unchanged tradition, in which Dickens featured as the spirit of intuitive love and Thackeray as the voice of empirical scepticism.

(v)

Griffin had seen in Dickens's work a democratic spirit which had its origins in the French Revolution. All men, regardless of birth and circumstances and even in despite of their own failings, were potentially equal, since there was "no height to which a man [might] not attain", if his heart were only open to "the divine . . . flame of love". This belief in "Worth in low places" and the "soul of goodness in things evil"

meant that for Griffin equality was inseparable from the doctrine of general human perfectibility. Democracy was primarily a moral concept. In G.K. Chesterton's Charles Dickens (1906), on the other hand, Dickens's connection with the French Revolution lay outside the realms of morality. He had expressed in his novels, Chesterton thought, the real and original spirit of the Revolution, producing stories that were "a carnival of liberty", and encouraging "anybody to be anything". He represented the "humane intoxication and expansion"⁷⁰ of a vanished world, qualities which the modern age, in its sadness and disillusionment, could not appreciate or enjoy⁷¹. A writer like George Gissing, according to Chesterton, was only likely to be pleased by Dickens when the novelist was at his least high-spirited, and would thus only be able to enjoy one of Dickens's poorest books, Little Dorrit, because it was "something a little modern and a little sad" which dealt with the wasting away of a man (William Dorrit)⁷². It was as an opponent to this drab realistic outlook that Chesterton looked on Dickens, considering his true greatness to stem, not from an ability to depict the collapse of men under the burdens of time and circumstance, but from his willingness to allow his characters infinite space for the expansion of their unique personalities, and from his championship of their right "to be anything" they pleased. In his fiction, every man was free to be himself, no matter to what extremes of peculiarity, grotesquerie or monstrosity he proceeded. There were no limits set to the assertion of identity, and the greatest of Dickens's creations were always gods, living "statically, in a perpetual summer of being themselves." Time and circumstance, which had power over William Dorrit, and, as Chesterton might have pointed out, over a

⁷⁰ Charles Dickens (1906), p.14.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁷² Ibid., p. 229.

character like Edwin Reardon in Gissing's New Grub Street (1891), left the comic figures of Dickens unimpaired: "It was not the aim of Dickens to show the effect of time and circumstance upon a character"⁷³.

Chesterton did not wish to read of human beings crushed and altered by the trials of life, but rather to be told that men might be as gods - not in any moral sense, but simply in their freedom from all restraints. He was an upholder, in his own highly idiosyncratic fashion, of "pagan self-assertion", and it was in the belief that every man had the right to unrestrained individuality that his democratic faith chiefly consisted. Equality, for him, was synonymous, not with general perfectibility, but with individual liberty. Desiring some escape, like Masson fifty years before, from the trammels of immediate reality, he treated the Dickens world (as Buchanan had in the 70's) as a realm of ogres, elves and fairies, and emphasised the strange personalism of the humorous characters, which Masson had obscured by his neo-classical insistence upon the artist's selection of general ideas from life.

Because he was embattled against the realistic tendencies of such writers as Gissing, Moore and Zola, Chesterton found the comparison with Thackeray of great use and interest, discerning in the novels of Dickens's contemporary, rather than the motive-seeking disliked by Griffin, an earlier type of the determinism which played so large a part in the depressing chronicles produced by modern authors :

Things in the Dickens story shift and change only in order to give us glimpses of great characters that do not change at all. If we had a sequel of *Pickwick* ten years afterwards, *Pickwick* would be exactly the same age. We know he would not have fallen into that strange and beautiful second childhood which soothed and simplified the end of Colonel Newcome. Newcome,

⁷³ Ibid., p.87.

throughout the book, is in an atmosphere of time :
 Pickwick, throughout the book, is not. This will
 probably be taken by most modern people as praise
 of Thackeray and dispraise of Dickens. But this
 only shows how few modern people understand Dickens.
 It also shows how few understand the faiths and the
 fables of mankind. The matter can only be roughly
 stated in one way. Dickens did not strictly make
 a literature; he made a mythology.⁷⁴

A character like Pickwick, standing outside time, was a god, eternally
 himself, while the personages created by Thackeray grew old, tired and
 disillusioned, and were broken by circumstances. However, the latter
 author was by no means a complete modern, since the effect of time upon
 Colonel Newcome was "beautiful" not sordid. Thackeray, declared
 Chesterton in an Introduction to selections from the novelist's work
 in 1909, was an artist who delicately hinted at the "melancholy" of
 life without ever suggesting - as a "dirty modern" would - its despair⁷⁵.
 It was not gloom which distinguished his outlook from that of Dickens
 so much as the soft glow of this "melancholy". Dickens, with his "love
 of large jokes and long stories and brown ale and all the white roads
 of England"⁷⁶, concentrated upon man in his strength. He had, said
 Chesterton in 1906, all the vigour of the living Middle Ages, represented
 by Chaucer, and had escaped that taste for "the strange sunset tints of
 Lippi and Botticelli" which had characterised the dying Middle Ages and
 fascinated Ruskin and Pater.⁷⁷ This same liking for "sunset tints",
 rather than for the bleak and barren winter landscapes of modernism,
 plainly characterised Thackeray, for his novels were bathed in a "rich

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 82 - 3.

⁷⁵ Introduction to Thackeray (Masters of Literature Series, 1909), p.xdiii.

⁷⁶ Charles Dickens, p. 160.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 161 - 2.

emotional autumn⁷⁸. The association of his writings with dying mediaevalism was made explicit in the 1909 Introduction :

We may therefore say with truth that Pendennis is an epic, because it celebrates the universal man. But it is also a mediaeval epic, and even a late mediaeval epic: because it celebrates not the strength of man but his weakness.⁷⁹

Chesterton had a considerable admiration for Thackeray, but placed him far below Dickens, precisely because of this insistence upon the littleness of mankind. In comparison with the gloom of the moderns his disillusionment was pervaded by a civilised poignancy which lay beyond their range, but nonetheless in comparison with the expansive freedom of Dickens it anticipated the later pessimism.

The central contrast between Thackeray and Dickens, to Chesterton's mind, lay in the difference between this melancholy and a boundless optimism. Thackeray's state of mind, he claimed in his 1911 collection of Prefaces from the Everyman edition of Dickens, could be summed up in the title of Vanity Fair, his greater contemporary's in that of Great Expectations⁸⁰. But this comparison, naturally enough, fell into difficulties when Chesterton came to consider the later novels of Dickens. Like most critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he observed in the books of the 1850's and 60's a decline from the great days of the 30's: "To the level of 'The Pickwick Papers' it is doubtful if he ever afterwards rose."⁸¹ It was impossible to claim for Bleak House the "humane intoxication" of the early work. This deterioration Chesterton explained by supposing that from Dombey onwards Dickens, instead of remaining true to the sources of his genius, had partially

⁷⁸ Charles Dickens, p. 291.

⁷⁹ Thackeray, pp. xiv-xv.

⁸⁰ Appreciations and Criticisms of Charles Dickens (1911), p.51.

⁸¹ Charles Dickens, p. 79.

succumbed to the influence of the more realistic Thackeray (and also of George Eliot, though this could only have been a later influence, a fact which Chesterton did not mention)⁸². Little Dorrit and Great Expectations (in spite of its title) were the novels to show this change most obviously. No longer was Dickens creating self-sufficient characters, who were always themselves. Instead, Chesterton clearly thought, he was showing men in the everyday world, worn down by time and circumstance, in the manner of Thackeray's personages. William Dorrit was a case in point, while in Great Expectations Dickens had attempted "a study in human weakness and the slow human surrender", producing the most Thackerayan of his works, which spoke with "the soft and gentle cynicism of old age"⁸³. Chesterton even went so far as to say that in this latter novel "Dickens was trying to be Thackeray"⁸⁴. Yet even here there was evidence of Dickens's supremacy, for Thackeray, though he could have depicted the weakness of Pip, could never have captured the vigour of Trabb's boy. The prime attribute of Dickens was vitality, which enabled him to bring "even to this moderate and modern story . . . an incomparable energy which [was] not moderate and which [was] not modern."⁸⁵ And, rather oddly, in Our Mutual Friend, Chesterton found what he was looking for, "a happy return to the earlier manner of Dickens a sort of Indian summer of his farce."⁸⁶ It was almost as if he had made up his mind that his narrative of Dickens's progress must end with the novelist reaffirming the standards of his youth. If he had been led astray in the second half of his career, it was essential that he die the hero of his own story, an opponent of modernism to the last.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 181 - 2. See also p.238 : "Dickens learnt to describe daily life as Thackeray and Jane Austen could describe it".

⁸³ Appreciations and Criticisms, p. 197.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.201.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 201 - 3.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.207.

The myth-making faculty which Dickens manifested in Pickwick was, for Chesterton, a sign of his democratic sympathies, not only because it showed his concern for the individual's right to selfhood, but also because it was a proof that he understood, as the moderns did not, the mind of the ordinary man, as it revealed itself in "the faiths and fables of mankind". There were two types of literature, the modern variety which dealt with men as they were and was produced by a small group of educated men, and an older kind which consisted of myths showing men as greater than they were and which was originated by common men⁸⁷. Thackeray's work clearly belonged in the first category. His art was neither democratic nor fabulous, since it was based on the accurate copying "of the manners of the modern world"⁸⁸: "Thackeray's creation was observation: Dickens's was poetry, and is therefore permanent."⁸⁹ Addressing himself to the hearts of the people and grounding his fantasies in the robust and timeless dreams and fears of the common man, Dickens would survive the nineteenth century, but Thackeray would pass away with the social world he had reflected. Fancy would endure, fact die⁹⁰.

In treating Thackeray as a photographer of society and Dickens as the creator of a more poetic truth, Chesterton followed the Victorians in distinguishing between accidental and elemental reality. But in his "pagan self-assertion" he broke away from the belief in authority and self-denial which had characterised a great deal of Victorian criticism. At the same time, he denied the mimetic bias of most Victorian commentaries on Dickens, and claimed for the artist complete freedom from theories of imitation. Masson, for all his insistence on the importance of imagination, had considered the novel only in terms of selection from

⁸⁷ Charles Dickens, pp. 83 - 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 293.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 295.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 294.

life (which had also led him to emphasise the general rather than the individual nature of Dickens's characters), but Chesterton confidently asserted that the very greatest art did not draw upon life at all. The importance of his Charles Dickens was that, for almost the first time, Dickens was hailed as the creator of an autonomous world, sustained by its own laws and owing no allegiance to external realities. His art was only life-like, Chesterton declared, in the truest sense of the word, for, like life, it cared for nothing outside itself, and was utterly "irresponsible" and "incredible", producing monsters like Captain Bunsby in Dombey just as life produced an extravagance like the rhinoceros⁹¹. It was not now the function of the artist to mirror humbly the glorious creation, but rather to vie with it in fertility and resourcefulness. In repudiating realism and responsibility Chesterton snapped the artistic and moral chains which Victorian criticism had endeavoured to impose upon literature. The dream-world which he had built from the stories of Dickens was not, however, the nightmare realm which critics of the 1940's, 50's and 60's were to discover in Dickensian myth. Unconventional as his view of the novelist was, he still regarded him, as admirers in the previous century had done, as one from whose work comfort could be drawn. It was this factor which undoubtedly led Edmund Wilson, in 1939, to dismiss as "pseudo-poetic booziness"⁹² much of the work of the critic who had in fact, whatever his weaknesses, been among the first to attempt a vindication of Dickens entirely in terms of poetic, as distinct from imitative, truth.

Continuing the opposition of optimism and pessimism, poetry and photography, Chesterton looked back to the Victorian age. Setting myth above surface truth, he gave to the traditional comparison a new

⁹¹ Ibid., p.17.

⁹² "Dickens : The Two Scrooges" (1939 lecture), The Wound and the Bow (Houghton Mifflin, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1941), p.3.

significance, looking forward to the developments of the post-Wilsonian era. He thus stood between two critical traditions, belonging to neither. The same was to some extent true of Arthur Machen, whose Hieroglyphics (1902) turned to new purpose the conventional antagonism of intuition and empiricism. "You know that there are, speaking very generally, two solutions of existence", commented the imaginary literary "hermit" whose observations formed the book's content, "one is the materialistic or rationalistic, the other the spiritual or mystic."⁹³ For the most part this was the standard nineteenth century view, except for the word "mystic". In another version of the same contrast, the phrase "myths and symbols" likewise indicated an alteration in the artistic climate :

Vanity Fair is information, while Pickwick is Truth; one tells you a number of facts about Becky Sharp and other people, while the other symbolises certain eternal and essential elements in human nature All the profound verities which have been revealed to man have come to him under the guise of myths and symbols . . . and truth in the form of a mathematical demonstration or a "rational" statement is a contradiction in terms.⁹⁴

The opposition between Dickens and Thackeray, appearing throughout Hieroglyphics, played a central rôle in Machen's antithesis of truthful symbol and superficial fact. He supposed that there were incorporeal areas of experience - no longer moral as in the Victorian era, but nevertheless lying at the heart of human existence - which could not be captured by the methods of the mimetic writer, since they were only to be expressed in terms of primal myth. The chief quality of all great art was its ability to deal with "the unknown", "the mystery of things"⁹⁵.

⁹³ Hieroglyphics (1923 Caerleon ed.), pp. 63 - 4.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 142 - 3.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 18, 42.

This led Machen to espouse the notion that literature should draw upon the subconscious, "that shadowy double, that strange companion of man, who walks . . . foot to foot with each one of us, and yet his paces are in an unknown world." Of this second world Thackeray was ignorant⁹⁶, whereas in Pickwick the hero, like Ulysses, journeyed into "the unknown", creating "an overpowering impression of 'strangeness', of remoteness, of withdrawal from the common ways of life."⁹⁷ Machen, reacting as Carlyle had done against materialism and empiricism, placed his faith not in unconscious intuitions of man's spiritual nature but in the wanderings of the subconscious, which opened up the illimitable world of dream shapes and whispered intimations of immortality through the metaphor of an endless journey into the "strangeness" of the human mind. The vistas of the inner landscape replaced those of the Ruskinian "heavenly land". Machen made explicit that division between layers of the mind which Lewes, in his theory of hallucination, had glanced at in 1872. Like Chesterton, he subverted Victorian ideas of objective truth by stressing the subjective origins of great art, and in his interest in the subconscious richness of "myths and symbols" he anticipated, to an even greater extent than Chesterton, the attitudes of later criticism.

A later critic who may have been influenced by the approaches to Dickens's work of Machen and Chesterton was John Cowper Powys, writing in 1915. Here mythology was turned to sinister purposes, in an essay which contained the first hints of a 'dark' Dickens, far removed from the intoxicated fantasist beloved by Chesterton :

Dickens's world is a world of gnomes and hob-goblins, of ghouls and of laughing angels. The realist of the Thackeray school finds nothing but monstrous exaggeration

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.42.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 50 - 1.

here - and fantastic mummery. If he were right, pardieu! If his sleek "reality" were all that there was - "alarum!" . . . But no Dickens is right. Neither "realist" or "psychologist" hits the mark, when it comes to the true diablerie of living people The surface of things is the heart of things; and the protruded goblin-tongue, the wagging head, the groping fingers, the shuffling step, are just as significant of the mad play-motif as any hidden thoughts. People think with their bodies, and their looks and gestures; nay! their very garments are words, tones, whispers, in their general Confession.⁹⁸

Powys moved in two apparently contradictory directions in this passage, towards fantasy on the one hand and materialism on the other. Taking Chesterton's fairy-land, he rendered it in a diabolical light, transforming gods and elves into ghouls and gnomes. It was this interest in the grotesque features of Dickens's fiction that led Powys to emphasise its dependence on physical characteristics. The dark current of the twisted inner life could only be expressed in terms of the twitching movements of the body. Man became a marionette, whose tangled strings jerked him hither and thither with apparent aimlessness. Thus, while Chesterton undermined Victorian concepts of realism, Powys subverted completely the ideal of human greatness, which Chesterton, in his own highly individual manner, still cherished. By insisting upon the relation of the Dickens world to "living people", Powys made life itself alarming and terrible. Fantasy was used, not as a refuge from reality, but in order to increase the strangeness and horror of the actual. The repudiation of Victorian values was complete.

For Powys, Thackeray scarcely existed except as an adjective denoting the outlook of the practical, down-to-earth, unimaginative, self-

satisfied man. The first two decades of the new century prized an insight into the "mystery" of life, in whatever form, and realism of the type which Thackeray was believed to represent, based upon the accurate reproduction of social manners, had no place. Machen, for example, complained in 1908 that Thackeray had been content simply to observe "the society about him with . . . the nicest accuracy", and so had heard "no message from the eternities" : "he was never inspired to sing the inexpressive song . . . neither dawn nor dusk made for him any sacrament of mystery . . . the voice of the fairy birds never penetrated to his cosy and well-arranged study."⁹⁹ Walter de la Mare, in 1911, also invoked "mystery", though not of a "fairy" kind, in his judgement of Thackeray, comparing him unfavourably with Tolstoy and Chelkov, and questioning the value of his "astonishingly lifelike panorama of the social London of his day" :

what is the meaning of it all to the mind fretted
by the deeper riddles of life? Against what back-
ground of mystery, of the beyond, do these puppets
enjoy, or rebel against, their being?¹⁰⁰

Similarly, George Moore, in his Avowals of 1919, criticised the novelist for being "interested only in the drift and litter of social life"¹⁰¹ and "unable or unwilling to look into the depths." He did not, said Moore, possess "that sense of the eternal which gives mystery and awe to a work of art"¹⁰². When Edmund Gosse, Moore's unfortunate interlocutor in Avowals, ventured to suggest that Thackeray had at least had sufficient knowledge of the "depths" to be able to hint at the evil which lay below the surface of social life, his remarks were tossed

⁹⁹ "The Art of Dickens", Academy, 11 April 1908, lxxiv, 664.

¹⁰⁰ "The Complete Works of Thackeray", Times Literary Supplement, 29 June 1911, 241; rptd. in a revised form in Private View (1953), p.43.

¹⁰¹ Avowals (1919), p.78.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 77.

aside in scorn: "And what terrible thing was Thackeray running away from? An adultery in Mayfair!"¹⁰³ The "depths" into which Moore gazed were not those of moral obliquity (or of what was deemed such by artificial society) but rather of the cosmic "mystery". For Machen, de la Mare and Moore alike, although their definitions of this "mystery" would have differed, Thackeray was lacking in poetic insight. There was nothing in his work, said Oliver Elton in 1920, to compare with the scene in War and Peace of "Prince Andrey lying wounded after Austerlitz, with his sense of the secret of the infinite skies above him"¹⁰⁴.

Thackeray's characters lived "under a low sky", without the "spaciousness" of the Russians¹⁰⁵. Dickens, though Elton would not have dreamed of comparing him with Tolstoy, was at least "in essence a poet", and this constituted the difference between him and Thackeray¹⁰⁶. It was this element of poetry in Dickens's work which helped to keep him alive during the first forty years of the present century, when his reputation was very low in many quarters and at a time when his former rival had slipped almost entirely from favour. While Thackeray was still deemed to be limited to the delineation of social manners, Dickens was felt, as he had been by such critics as Samuel Phillips and David Lester Richardson, to be closer to the essential and elemental regions of the human spirit, even though conceptions of 'essence' were no longer bounded by morality.

(vi)

The reaction against Victorianism, evident in the work of Chesterton, Machen and Powys, had commenced within the Victorian age itself, though

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.80.

¹⁰⁴ A Survey of English Literature, 1830 - 1880 (1920), ii, 254.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.255.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.216.

in a different form from belief in myth and symbol. From the mid-80's onwards, novelists who were prominent at the turn of the century - notably Henry James, W.D. Howells and George Gissing - advocated a new aesthetic of fiction which was in conscious opposition to the values of the mid-Victorian era. In their hands, the juxtaposition of the names of Dickens and Thackeray assumed, as a consequence of this revolt against the past, an entirely novel shape.

In the criticism of Chesterton and Machen, the two novelists continued to be regarded as opposites, because they conveniently embodied the antagonism of imagination and realism in which these later critics, battling against prosaic modernism, were interested. Elsewhere, however, the traditional assumption of a dichotomy had disappeared, as H.G. Wells, looking back on the 1890's from the vantage point of 1934, indicated :

The predominance of Dickens and Thackeray and the successors and imitators they had inspired was passing. . . . For a generation the prestige of the great Victorians remained like the shadow of vast trees in a forest, but now . . . it was lifting¹⁰⁷

No longer were the authors treated as opposed or complementary. In Wells's eyes, they were twins not rivals. He did not say, as readers had done since 1850, "Dickens represents this outlook upon life and Thackeray that, and either the two views are incompatible or they must somehow be reconciled if a total understanding of life is to be achieved", but rather, "Dickens and Thackeray together exemplify the attitudes of their time, which our own has left behind." The phrase "Dickens and Thackeray" had become convenient shorthand for the immediate past, and the decline of their reputation was inseparable from the death of Victorianism itself. It was not merely these two writers in particular

¹⁰⁷ Experiment in Autobiography (2 vols., 1934), ii, 506.

whose "predominance" had passed away, but, as Wells went on to make clear, the whole array of nineteenth century novelists, who could not meet the needs of a rapidly reorganising society.

This habit of regarding the two novelists as twin exemplars of their period was widespread. To Henry James, for example, in the early 80's, they typified that lack of self-conscious technique in earlier English fiction which he himself, as the novelist of a more sophisticated time, was endeavouring to repair. The mid-Victorian novel, he claimed, had "had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it" :

it would take much more courage than I possess to intimate that the form of the novel as Dickens and Thackeray (for instance) saw it, had any taint of incompleteness. It was, however, naïf . . . there was a comfortable, good-humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that this was the end of it.¹⁰⁸

Though it was quite true that the earlier novelists had not discussed their work in the far-reaching manner of James, this absence of written theory did not necessarily mean that their practice was unsophisticated. What James was attacking, though he did not clearly see this, was not "Dickens and Thackeray" so much as the state of mind of many of their contemporaries, as it had manifested itself in the largely "naïf" criticism accorded to fiction in the mid-Victorian age. The two names were again shorthand for the limitations of an entire epoch.

Apart from their lack of interest in theory, there were matters of execution (presumably arising out of that deficiency) on which James criticised Dickens and Thackeray. Congratulating Wells on Kipps in 1905, he observed that this work was the first "consistently ironic or satiric novel", since it was free from "the sentimental or conventional

interference . . . of which Thackeray is full", and the first depiction of the lower middle classes to be without "the picturesque, the grotesque, the fantastic and romantic interference, of which Dickens, e.g., is so misleadingly . . . full."¹⁰⁹ Though James differentiated between the novelists here, he found them both guilty of the same crime, that of "interference". They had intruded themselves between the reader and their subject. The similarity of this verdict to Victorian accusations of obtrusiveness was, however, only superficial. That James should accuse Thackeray of being a sentimentalist not a cynic reflected a complete change of attitudes towards the rôle of the artist, for this interference was not, as for Ruskin, a distortion of the beauty of God's creation. In common with many writers and critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries James had a strong faith in the duty of the novelist, not to uphold religious faith, but to remain true to the events and the evaluations which would arise naturally out of the characters and the situation which presented themselves to him as the starting-point of his story. There must be no alteration for purposes of didacticism, of sentimentalising or of vulgar amusement. In this certainty that the artist must never sacrifice the integrity of his subject to the requirements of his audience, the Ruskinian ideal of morally orientated love gave place to Taine's concept of disinterested passion of the kind evinced by Balzac for Valérie Marneffe. The indebtedness of James to the French critic was evident in an essay of 1905:

Balzac loved his Valérie then as Thackeray did not love his Becky All his [Balzac's] impulse was to la faire valoir, to give her all her value, just as Thackeray's attitude was the opposite one, a desire positively to expose and desecrate poor Becky - to follow her up, catch her in the act, and bring her

¹⁰⁹ 19 November 1905, Letters (ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols., 1920), ii, 41.

to shame The English writer wants to make sure . . . of your moral judgement; the French is willing . . . to risk, for the sake of his subject, your spiritual salvation. Mme Marneffe . . . is "exposed", so far as anything in life, or in art, may be, by the working-out of the situation and the subject themselves We do not feel, very irritatedly, very lecturedly . . . that she has been sacrificed.¹¹⁰

While Balzac allowed his characters to act out their personalities to their logical end, Thackeray was always concerned with making a moral point and so "sacrificed" a vital creation such as Becky to ethical considerations. The French novelist was obedient to the inner laws of his narrative, the English thought always of his public. Thus, in James's criticism, the concept of objectivity excluded the moral aim which for the Victorians had formed its very basis.

Out of this new interpretation of the artist's relationship to his material grew the notion that Dickens and Thackeray had enslaved themselves to their audience, neglecting their responsibilities to art. One manifestation of this was in the work of W.D. Howells, who, although he made no comparison between them on this point, criticised them both, in his Heroines of Fiction (1901), for shaping their material to meet the expectations of their readers. Dickens, in killing off Dora and so allowing David to achieve the traditional happy ending with Agnes, had consulted only "the reader's comfort" not the likely course of events in real life¹¹¹. Thackeray had severely adopted towards Becky, "a woman badly born, and reared in dependence and repression", the "old

¹¹⁰ "The Lesson of Balzac", Atlantic Monthly (Boston and New York), August 1905, xcvi, 176-7; rptd. The House of Fiction (ed. Leon Edel, 1957), p. 73.

¹¹¹ Heroines of Fiction (London and New York, 1901), i, 147; rptd. from Harper's Bazaar (1900).

conventional morality" which a "later and subtler time" had improved upon¹¹², while in the case of females of another type, Amelia Sedley and Rachel Castlewood, his adherence to the standards of his time had issued in sentimentality :

he was the discoverer . . . of the fallibility of angels; but he had not the courage of his facts, quite, and when he had allowed the defects of their qualities to be seen he felt bound to colour these qualities to a yet more heavenly hue, and so was in danger of undoing all the good of his discovery.¹¹³

This again constituted a reversal of the standard Victorian position. Formerly Thackeray had been taken to task for rendering virtuous women unworthy of reverence by the introduction of flaws into their goodness; now he was pitied and patronised ("a simple soul", Howells called him¹¹⁴) because of his supposed inability to free himself, even though he saw its falsity, from the tradition of the pure domestic angel. No more than his predecessors did Howells acknowledge that the tension between irony and sentiment, exemplified in the narrator's mingled criticism and adoration of good women, intentionally dramatised a division in the human consciousness between intellect and emotion. The Victorians rated Thackeray for his cynicism, the 'moderns' for his failure to remain true to his scepticism. Both groups wished that he had

¹¹² Ibid., 194 - 5; rptd. from Harper's Bazaar (1900).

¹¹³ Ibid., p.203. Howells himself did not have "the courage of his facts", for he condemned the relationship between Rachel and Esmond on the grounds that: "It does not seem either nice or true" (ibid., p.209). A thorough-going realist would not have asked if it was "nice" as well as "true". There were apparently certain doubts which ought not be cast even on angelic purity. In this revulsion from what seemed distasteful, Howells allowed emotion to overcome intellect, and showed himself to be not impervious to Victorian values.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 194.

stressed one side of his vision at the expense of the other, and both were therefore equally limited in their appreciation of his work.

Both Howells and James had in their youth fallen under the spell of Dickens and Thackeray. They were "the creators of superior life" to whom the young James had owed most during his boyhood in the 50's¹¹⁵, and two of the three or four "divinities" of whom Howells had been the "hypnotized devotee" during his lifetime¹¹⁶. As late as 1882, the latter could write: "I always thought myself . . . quite unapproached in my appreciation of the great qualities of Dickens and Thackeray I suspect that no Englishman could rate them higher than I do."¹¹⁷ This declaration, however, was offered in mitigation of his comments made earlier in the same month in the Century: "The art of fiction has, in fact, become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens and Thackeray These great men are of the past - they and their methods and interests"¹¹⁸. It seems possible, from the inconsistency of these remarks, that Howells's repudiation of the two novelists did not express his feelings in full, and that his true state of mind combined admiration and impatience. It was precisely because the influence of Dickens and Thackeray had been so strong in his adolescence, and lingered thereafter, that his reaction against them was so strongly emphasised. He needed to place great weight on the faults of the Victorians, ignoring their merits, in order to free himself from their spell and to form his own fictional creed. To escape from "Dickens and Thackeray" was a necessary part of escaping from his own immaturity. The same was probably true of James.

¹¹⁵ Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), rptd. Autobiography (ed. F.W. Dupee, 1956), p. 324.

¹¹⁶ See My Literary Passions (1895), pp. 136, 93.

¹¹⁷ "Literary Gossip", Athenaeum, 25 November 1882, 700.

¹¹⁸ "Henry James, Jr.", Century, November 1882, n.s. iii, o.s. xxv, 28.

Arnold Bennett's irritation with the Victorians, on the other hand, does not appear to have been motivated by any such personal need to outgrow his own boyhood, since at the age of 32, in 1898, he could still claim (perhaps not with complete truth) that: "Of Dickens . . . I know nothing."¹¹⁹ It was partly the self-conscious elaboration of the "big Victorians" which most displeased him, their lack of stylistic "simplicity and power"¹²⁰ and their tendency, which he characterised as "the Dickens or Thackeray grossness" to "shout and weep all over the place"¹²¹. He disliked also their taste for "strongly marked character". When Wells objected to the vagueness of the heroine's characterisation in Bennett's Leonora (1903) and compared it to the clearness of "some of the people of Thackeray and Dickens" of whom it could always be said, "How like Becky (or whoever it is) to do that"¹²², he received a speedy rebuke from the author: "You still cling to the Dickens-Thackeray standards, & judge by them Would you say 'How like Eugénie Grandet, or Madame Bovary, or Maisie'?" Bennett believed that the novelist was better employed in "the expression of general moods . . . a constant 'synthetising' of emotion", than in the depiction of types¹²³. He plainly felt that human nature was too

¹¹⁹ Letters (ed. James Hepburn, 3 vols., Oxford, 1966 - 70), ii, 104.

¹²⁰ 1 July 1901, ibid., 158.

¹²¹ 4 October 1902, ibid., 175.

¹²² 20 August 1903; text from Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells (ed. Harrison Wilson, 1960), pp. 93 - 4.

¹²³ 24 August 1903, ibid., pp. 95 - 6; Letters, ii, 179. But cf. Bennett's completely opposed verdict in a journal entry for 11 September 1924: "Question: Does a novelist want his characters to remain in the mind of the reader? Some novelists don't. But I do, for one. Dickens's characters remain in the mind. They may perhaps be too conventionalised, too simplified. Same for Thackeray - Dobbin and Amelia. But they remain in the mind." (The Journals of Arnold Bennett, 1921 - 28, ed. Newman Flower, 1933, p. 52.)

subtle a thing to be captured by the delineator of surface peculiarities. Character was a question not of highly defined individual features, but of imprecise and shadowy "moods" and "emotions". In this concept of personality, Bennett showed himself to be at least in some measure of harmony with James among older and Lawrence and Woolf (who considered that her theory was exactly opposed to Bennett's) among later novelists. Everything, he thought, was made obvious in Dickens and Thackeray. Nothing was delicate or fine. Becky Sharp and the characters of Dickens were further evidence of the vulgar Victorian tendency - already shown to be manifested in their style and their excessive emotionalism - to extravagant outward effects.

Nothing could be more typical of the post-Victorian practice of yoking the novelists together than Bennett's blanket phrase, "the Dickens-Thackeray standards". He shared too with James and Howells the sense that the Victorian novelists had sacrificed art to external requirements. "It is notorious", he commented in 1920, "that Dickens, like Thackeray, often wrote under self-imposed conditions (especially conditions of haste) which made real artistic integrity impossible."¹²⁴ Clearly, he was referring to their choice of serial publication, which had resulted in a constant battle against time. Many of their faults could doubtless be traced to this circumstance. George Gissing, however, believed that the demands imposed by the three-volume format upon Victorian authors had been a more important factor than serialisation, and so welcomed the change to one volume - which occurred in the 80's and 90's - as enabling the writer to dispense with the elaborations of the preceding age :

¹²⁴ To the Editor of the Nation, 22 March 1920, Letters, iii, 125.

Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length, and with profusion of detail; their plan is to tell everything, and leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic, I think, is the later method, of merely suggesting, of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist is omniscient; I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life, hinting, surmising, telling in detail what can be told and no more. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentment.¹²⁵

In view of the fact that Dickens and Thackeray did not write with the 'three-decker' in mind, Gissing could not specifically charge them with having waived "artistic integrity" in favour of external "conditions". His essential objection here was to what James later called "interference", for it was his firm conviction that the novelist should dramatise more than he should relate, not manipulating his characters but allowing them to unfold naturally.

There were also, Gissing implied, areas of personality which could not be made explicit, but could only be hinted at, not because they were too shocking for presentation, but as a consequence of the complexity of human nature. James, Gissing and Bennett would all have agreed that these finer shades of consciousness, upon which they themselves wished to concentrate, had not been contained in the "old" novel. Intensity of insight, not expansiveness of canvas, was the necessary tool for such delicate work. The fictional personage must be presented by means of a few concentrated experiences; if an attempt was made to portray his whole life, then his essential aspects - again more mysterious than the moral ones ascribed to him by the Victorians - were lost in the midst of a variety of character and event. One who disagreed with the modern

¹²⁵ To his brother, late August 1885, Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family (1927), p. 166.

trend was Mrs. Blake, the eminent novelist characterised in Vernon Lee's essay "On Novels" in Baldwin (1886). She felt that if the novel was to become a psychological study, then there was an end to it "as a work of art" : "The perpetual preoccupation of psychology has pretty well got rid of all real interest of plot and incident, and is rapidly getting rid of all humour; a comic character like those of Dickens, and even those of Thackeray, will soon be out of the question."¹²⁶ These old-fashioned views did not, however, represent the opinions of Mrs. Blake's creator, who put into the mouth of her 'hero', Baldwin, a partial defence of the modern methods.

Gissing's strictures about the 'three-decker' reflected a feeling that Victorian writers of fiction, as well as lacking the modern's subtle knowledge of the human soul, had compromised their "artistic integrity" by surrendering to the demands of circulating libraries, whose only concern was profit, and to the expectations of the public, which had no interest in art and merely wished to be entertained for as long as possible during its leisure hours. In Charles Dickens (1898) and in his Prefaces (1898 - 1900) to the Rochester edition of Dickens, Gissing showed himself to be as concerned as James and Howells with the relationship between the writer and the pressure of public opinion. Using the letters of Dickens to Forster and Thackeray's Preface to Pendennis, he showed that both novelists had been aware of the restrictions which obedience to popular morality placed on art. But at this point it became clear that Gissing, unlike his contemporaries, wished to draw a distinction between the two men:

¹²⁶ Baldwin (1886), p.193.

Thackeray, we may be sure, thought much more on the subject, and in graver mood; and as a result, he allowed himself more liberty than Dickens - not without protest from the many-headed. There existed this difference between the two men. Thackeray had a kind of strength not given to his brother in art.¹²⁷

Gissing thus contrasted the novelists on a point where others could see only similarity. A few pages later, the nature of Dickens's weakness was made clearer, with a comparison of Lizzie Hexam and Fanny Bolton. Dickens had idealised his lower-class heroine, whereas Thackeray had drawn "one of the truest characters in all fiction, - so unpleasantly true, that readers ignorant of her class might imagine the author to have drawn her in a spirit of social prejudice."¹²⁸ Thackeray, here at least, had been faithful to his art and to life. He had not concealed the facts, however mean, and had refused to romanticise for the sake of making his readers comfortable. It was for glossing over what was unpleasant that Gissing felt he must censure Dickens: "Avoidance of the disagreeable, as a topic uncongenial to art - this is Dickens's principle."¹²⁹ The late Victorian realist could not approve of such obedience to the susceptibilities of potential readers, which constituted another form of James's "sentimental interference". It was almost certainly the greater "strength" of Dickens's rival in this respect which led to Gissing's private confession in 1898 that "Thackeray . . . appeals to me much more strongly"¹³⁰, and to his later statement that: "In certain directions, Thackeray may be held the greatest 'realist' who

¹²⁷ Charles Dickens. A Critical Study (1903 ed.), p. 76.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

¹³⁰ Quoted by Edward Clodd, Memories (1916), p. 170.

ever penned fiction."¹³¹ Applying to earlier writers the standards of artistic responsibility which he held in common with other novelists of the period, Gissing continued to see the Dickens-Thackeray comparison in terms of opposition rather than resemblance.

But, although he felt that Dickens was lacking in "literary conscientiousness, as we understand it"¹³², he also saw that the author of Pickwick had been, for his day, a realistic, almost a revolutionary, writer, preparing the way for later developments. In his Preface to the Rochester Oliver, he recalled Thackeray's criticism of that novel and agreed that it contained sufficient faults to arouse such a man's "native scorn of the untrue and feeble". But, he continued :

It was undoubtedly Dickens's conviction that, within limits imposed by decency, he had told the truth, and nothing but the truth, about his sordid and criminal characters Think what we may of his perfectly sincere claim, the important thing, in our retrospect, is the spirit in which he made it. After a long interval during which English fiction was represented by the tawdry unreal or the high imaginative . . . a new writer demands attention for stories of obscure lives, and tells his tale so attractively that high and low give ear. It is a step in social and political history; it declares the democratic tendency of the new age.¹³³

Though amused by Dickens's contention that he had drawn his characters as such people really were, Gissing yet realised, as the novelist's earliest readers had done, that the 1830's had marked a change in

¹³¹ Preface to Oliver Twist (1899), rptd. The Immortal Dickens (1924; rptd. 1969), p.75.

¹³² Charles Dickens, pp. 51 - 2.

¹³³ The Immortal Dickens, pp. 75 - 7.

literary taste. Dickens, the pioneer of realism of subject-matter if not of treatment (this place would probably have been reserved for Thackeray), had opened up new areas of experience to the writer of fiction. Sketches by Boz had brought "a refreshing breath of reality into the literary atmosphere"¹³⁴, and Nicholas Nickleby had boldly taken as its hero a "penniless youth of the everyday world" :

He was opening in truth a new era of English fiction,
and the critic of our day who loses sight of this,
who compares Dickens to his disadvantage with
novelists of a later school, perpetrates the
worst kind of injustice!¹³⁵

This was a broad-minded vindication of Dickens's work, but an unsatisfactory one in that it was made on historical not artistic grounds. It supported rather than denied the suggestion that Dickens was outmoded, part of an England and of an ethos which had passed away.

Nevertheless Gissing was by far the most flexible of the late nineteenth century novelists in his approach to Victorianism. Not only did he endeavour to make allowances for Dickens by placing him in historical perspective, he also did justice to the genius which had created such a character as Mrs. Gamp. His remarks upon avoidance of "the disagreeable" (which he called "idealism" or "idealization") were intended for the serious figures - for Lizzie Hexam, or for Alice Marwood in Dombey, for instance - not for the comic, in whom idealism was put to good purpose. Leaving out all that would have been vile in a real-life Sairey, Dickens retained her essential vulgarity, whereas in the idealisation of Alice he had carried out a process not of omission but

¹³⁴ Preface to Sketches (1900), ibid., p.34.

¹³⁵ Preface to Nickleby (1898), ibid., p. 94.

of "substitution of falsity". The nurse was an example of "true idealism", the fallen woman was built up out of "attitude and sham"¹³⁶. Thus Gissing, again unlike his contemporaries, differentiated between the good and bad portions of Dickens's work, and reached a more balanced view of his achievement.

In spite of his preference for Thackeray, Gissing avoided a final verdict on the relative merits of the two authors. Towards the end of Charles Dickens, he denied the value of any discussion of the matter:

Twenty years ago a familiar topic for debating societies was a comparison of the literary characteristics of Dickens and Thackeray - or of Thackeray and Dickens, I forget which. Not impossibly, the theme is still being discussed in country towns or London suburbs. Of course, it was always an absurdity, the points of difference between these authors being so manifest . . . that debate in the proper sense there could be none. As to which of the two was the "greater novelist", the question may be left for answer to those who are capable of seriously propounding it.¹³⁷

The habit of comparison, Gissing felt, was as creaking and antiquated as was Dickens himself in many respects. It had no place in serious literary discussion and could only interest the ignorant middle-class amateur. This did not prevent him from making use of it himself when it was convenient to do so. Thackeray was the realist who had respect for his art, Dickens the idealist who aimed at giving his readers pleasure - this was the central opposition between the two men, in

¹³⁶ Charles Dickens, pp. 102 - 5.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p.260.

Gissing's mind. On these grounds Thackeray would certainly be the greater. There may even have been, in the somewhat ambiguously worded refusal to enter into comparisons quoted above, a hint that, since Thackeray was so much the stronger minded of the two, there was little point in giving lengthy consideration to a question of superiority which was so easy of decision.

Yet, if Gissing had volunteered an explicit statement of their relative overall merits, it would perhaps, finally, not have been dissimilar to that he delivered on Dickens and Balzac. The latter, he said, was "a stronger intellect, but by no means a greater genius."¹³⁸ Intellect could no more provide complete satisfaction for Gissing than for earlier writers. What helped to keep Dickens alive in his mind was in fact puzzlement as to how a popular author could also, at least on occasion, be a great one. By normal standards, Dickens should never have been a genius: "Few really great men can have had so narrow an intellectual scope."¹³⁹ He had not been an educated man, he had not been possessed of a realistic vision, and, worst of all, he had occupied a position with respect to his public which had not been that of the conscientious modern artist. Why had these shortcomings not utterly ruined his art? Gissing felt a greater affinity with Thackeray, but it was Dickens who engaged his attention. This was partly due to the fact that his work on the latter was commissioned, but at the same time a novelist like Dickens could not fail to interest him deeply, because the career of such a writer touched directly upon his own central preoccupation - dramatised in the characters of Edwin Reardon and Jasper Milvain in New Grub Street - with the relationship between serious art and popular fame.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 264.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

It is clear from certain passages quoted in this section that one creed was shared by James, Howells and Gissing, however much their respective artistic productions varied. The views of Oscar Wilde on the artist's duty were extreme, but they reflected the general mood of the anti-Victorian reaction :

Popular authority and the recognition of popular authority are fatal. Thackeray's Esmond is a beautiful work of art because he wrote it to please himself. In his other novels . . . he is too conscious of the public, and spoils his work by appealing directly to the sympathies of the public, or by directly mocking at them. A true artist takes no notice whatever of the public. The public are to him non-existent.¹⁴⁰

Gissing, for one, placed more emphasis on the novelist's responsibility to the facts of external experience than did Wilde - whose 'Vivian' in "The Decay of Lying" rebuked Dickens for his "depressing" concern with contemporary social problems¹⁴¹ - but the two men had in common the faith that art was not to be compromised by obedience to (or, in Wilde's theory, even by satire upon) the values of the public. It was this belief that united the men of the 90's against Victorianism, and determined their attitudes towards Dickens and Thackeray. From their basic assumption that art was autonomous and must be true to itself flowed the attacks upon the sentimentality and moralising of both authors and the sudden concern, at the turn of the century, with a matter which, surprisingly, had not much concerned the Victorians, the supposedly

¹⁴⁰ "The Soul of Man under Socialism", Fortnightly Review, 1 February 1891, xlix, 312; rptd. The Artist as Critic. Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde (ed. Richard Ellmann, 1970), p. 280.

¹⁴¹ "The Decay of Lying" (1839), The Artist as Critic, p. 300.

intrusive addresses of Thackeray to his audience ("he forgets the impartiality of the artist," alleged Charles Whibley in 1903, "and goes about babbling with his own puppets"¹⁴²). In the urgent need which later writers felt to break entirely with the past, the extent to which Thackeray had offended the susceptibilities of his time was often lost sight of, and he was regarded as an upholder of the moral conformity with which Dickens, by his Victorian admirers, had always been associated. The distinction between the two men disappeared, for all except Gissing (and even he referred to "Dickens and Thackeray" as mutual exemplars of the omniscient method). The effect of the revolt against Victorianism - which might have been expected to produce more contrasts like Gissing's, between Dickensian morality and Thackerayan realism, in the latter's favour - was in fact to destroy the basis of comparison.

(vii)

The decline of Thackeray, and with him of the traditional comparison, was completed in the year of his centenary, 1911. The issue in that year of a new edition (the Centenary Biographical) of his complete works - the last such edition, as it transpired - seemed to set a seal upon the reputation which W.C. Brownell and Frederic Harrison had earlier hailed as "classic". But it was Dickens, and not Thackeray, who was to survive. George Saintsbury, as early as 1895, had seen a falling-off in respect for the latter's work¹⁴³, and Chesterton, in 1911, finalised this process, when he took the word "classic" and transformed it into a label for art that was enshrined in the past, admired but not loved, preserved but not living : "Thackeray has become classical; but Dickens has done more:

¹⁴² William Makepeace Thackeray (1903), p. 93.

¹⁴³ Corrected Impressions, rptd. Collected Essays and Papers (3 vols., 1923, ii, 188 - 9.

he has remained modern."¹⁴⁴ Thackeray's essentially nineteenth century world, "that universe of ranks and respectabilities in comparison with which Dickens was called a caricaturist", was "breaking up like a cloudland", and only the caricatures of Dickens remained "like things carved in stone"¹⁴⁵. Within a year of this separation between "classical" and "modern" - the latter word used by Chesterton, for once, non-pejoratively - three periodical writers, from their various viewpoints, had endorsed the truth of these remarks about the relative merits of Dickens and Thackeray. Blackwood's declared the former "free of all the world", but thought the latter's appeal very limited :

His tiresome habit of obtruding himself, the furious rage with which he takes moral shies at the Aunt Sallies of his own creation, his ready subservience to his own place and time, will limit his appreciation to the land of his birth.¹⁴⁶

Chesterton's comparison reappeared here in terms of the 'modern' objections raised against Thackeray (and Dickens too). He had been the slave of Victorian society, interfering with the autonomy of character in the interests of morality. Something of the same feeling may have dictated the London Quarterly Review's remark in the following year that "his easy indifference . . . to any other leading characters than are ready to his hand in the puppet box" had "confined his popularity to England, and in England to a comparatively restricted set of readers". Distaste for the manipulation of character and a sense that Thackeray dealt only with the manners of a "restricted" section of society were

¹⁴⁴ Appreciations and Criticisms, p. xiii.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. vii - viii.

¹⁴⁶ "Musings without Method", Blackwood's, June 1911, clxxxix, 851.

perhaps combined here. This critic added: "For English literature's most genuine and permanently established citizen of the world, it is to Dickens that we must go."¹⁴⁷ However, Dickens and Thackeray would "perhaps, finally be pronounced as the two greatest novelists who have at any time written in the English language"¹⁴⁸. The Nineteenth Century, a month later, continued the idea that Thackeray's appeal was more limited than that of his contemporary. Dickens's forte was "creation", Thackeray's and George Eliot's "compilation"; the first was timeless, the second, because of its fidelity to immediate reality, was approachable only through its own age¹⁴⁹. Bumble and Pickwick, like the characters of Homer and Shakespeare, were not realistic figures, but "splendid, or, if we will, exaggerated, example[s] of what Life could be if we were content to trust it."¹⁵⁰ This final phrase clearly derived from a reading of Chesterton. The divine freedom of the Dickens fairy-land was once more being celebrated at the expense of the localised observation of fact which was presumed to constitute the achievement of Thackeray.

At the beginning of the next decade, the 1920's, the fall of Thackeray was further confirmed. In 1922 - a year after Percy Lubbock had condemned Thackeray's intrusiveness on Jamesian grounds - John Middleton Murry, in the Times, declared that since 1914 there had been a strong revival of interest in Dickens among the young: "While Thackeray is decidedly tarnished since he was put on the shelf, the splendour of Dickens, I fancy, now that he has been taken down again, shines as bright as ever."¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ T.H.S. Escott, "Charles Dickens", London Quarterly Review, January 1912, 5th ser. iii, o.s. cxviii, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴⁹ Darrell Figgis, "Charles Dickens", Nineteenth Century, February 1912, lxxi, 277.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 275.

¹⁵¹ "The Dickens Revival", Times, 19 May 1922, 16; rptd. Pencillings (1928), pp. 31 - 2.

One of the pieces of evidence cited by Murry in support of his claim for a Dickens revival was George Santayana's essay in the Dial of the previous year. This, though Murry did not mention the fact, had contained another indication of the slump in Thackeray's prestige: "It is usual to compare Dickens with Thackeray, which is like comparing the grape with the gooseberry; there are obvious points of resemblance, and the gooseberry has some superior qualities of its own; but you can't make red wine of it."¹⁵² In Santayana's eyes, to write about the differences or similarities between Dickens and Thackeray would have been a waste of time, since there was clearly no equality of status between them. Thackeray, and with him the comparison itself, had dwindled into a gooseberry.

Dickens's comic genius was one factor which guaranteed his continuing appeal. Another was his passion for social reform. Shaw, in 1911, detected in Hard Times the spirit of "Karl Marx, Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter, rising up against civilization itself as against a disease"¹⁵³. The voice of revolution was heard also in W. Walter Crotch's The Secret of Dickens (1919), though this critic saw Dickens very much in the nineteenth century role of father to the poor, while Shaw envisaged as desirable the total abolition of the system which made this paternalism possible. Dickens, said Crotch, had been "the supreme witness for the common man, the great revolutionary", but Thackeray had known nothing of the world outside Mayfair and had passed by "the greater society, the human family, which comprises ostlers as well as earls"¹⁵⁴. The political tendency of Dickens's fiction, whether regarded as democratic or

¹⁵² Soliloquies in England (1922), p.70.

¹⁵³ Introduction (written 1911) to Hard Times, for the Waverley Edition of Dickens (1913 - 5), p. vii.

¹⁵⁴ The Secret of Dickens (1919), p. 152.

revolutionary, made it relevant to contemporary concerns. At the same time, it contained elements of poetry and "mystery" which found an echo in the modern mind, and which could be discerned through the vulgarities and imperceptiveness which so often disfigured his work. In Powys's account of the Dickens world, as in Shaw's treatment of Hard Times, the complete critical respectability of Dickens in the post-Wilsorian era was foreshadowed. Thackeray, however, was neither revolutionary nor mystic, and, in the absence of such saving graces, fell into neglect, in spite of the prognostications of certain critics in the late nineteenth century. His habit of intruding himself into his work and his subservience to the morality of his time destroyed his claim to artistic integrity, his limited social outlook made him seem a figure from the past, and his failure to comprehend the depths and heights of the soul showed him to have a very narrow understanding of human experience. When one member of the traditional partnership was so discredited, and even the survivor's reputation was still far from certain in many quarters, there was little interest in making comparisons between them. During the second and third decades of this century, the practice passed into almost total obedience, but in the 30's and again in more recent criticism it was renewed, on a more limited scale, and once more provided a reflection of current artistic and philosophical preoccupations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MODERN PERIOD : FROM THE 1930'S TO THE 1970'S

It was noted at the conclusion of the previous chapter that two factors, apart from humour, contributed to the survival of Dickens in the first three decades of this century - his social attitudes and his awareness of human "mystery". In the period from the 40's onwards these have been the dominant concerns of Dickens criticism, and this is reflected in the use, limited though it has been, which has been made of the comparison with Thackeray during this time.

(1)

In the criticism of James, Howells and Gissing it was envisaged that the artist would be true to his inspiration by remaining free from the morality of his age. Later, this belief led to the formulation of a more violent creed, which required that the artist set himself in active rebellion against the pressures of the society in which he lived. This concept of literature was expressed in an essay of 1936 by Seán O'Faoláin :

We have broken with tradition both in literature and in life, and if we are to receive any inspiration it will not be from [Dickens] . It will be from those who broke with tradition before and after him, those individual wanderers out of the orderly procession in which he, like a general, brings up the rear - those scouts and guerillas of the disorganised rebellion of our times.¹

¹ "Dickens and Thackeray", The English Novelists (ed. Derek Verschoyle, 1936), p. 151.

For this writer, the function of the artist was exactly the opposite to that allotted him in the Victorian era. He was to be a leader of the revolt against established authority. Dickens, in spite of his genius, had refused this responsibility and had "hitched his star to the wagon of conventional thought and conventional morality": "He became the novelist of bourgeois thought the creature of his times He is, in short, the great comforter of the nineteenth century"². Therefore his reputation would decline, while that of Thackeray would increase ("though - because Dickens was immense - it is unlikely if they will . . . ever meet"), for Thackeray, said O'Faoláin, had not been "sold to his times" to the extent of Dickens. Though he was "no aberrant", being "too much of the commune" for that, yet he had, in a gentlemanly small way, done what Hardy and Lawrence after him did: "he slapped smug English morality in the face." He was even fit to rank with certain of the Continental masters :

The man who wrote a Novel without a Hero and almost made a heroine of Becky Sharp, is . . . near enough to Maupassant who made a heroine out of Boule de Suif, to be company for Turgenev or Flaubert: possibly not very good company and they would have quizzed him a great deal, but let that pass.³

Though patronising Thackeray, O'Faoláin nevertheless achieved a more accurate understanding of his work than those who claimed that he had been completely bound to the conventions of his age. It should be pointed out, however, that it was the subversive qualities of Becky that this critic stressed, not those of the weakly virtuous Amelia, whom he would

² Ibid., pp. 147 - 8.

³ Ibid., p. 148.

probably have regarded as the epitome of the sentimental Victorian morality from which he himself had broken away. His rendering of justice to Thackeray was only partial, and was, moreover, achieved only at the expense of injustice to Dickens. As in the Victorian period, it seemed impossible to appreciate both authors equally.

The standards applied to the nineteenth century novelists by O'Faoláin were substantially those used by Shaw, but the verdicts were entirely different, since Shaw came down heavily on the side of Dickens, distinguishing, in a 1937 Introduction to Great Expectations, between the bourgeois who looked on the existing social system as basically right and in need only of occasional reforms and the revolutionary who wished to sweep away the entire structure :

We have only to compare Thackeray and Trollope with Dickens to perceive this contrast Thackeray and Trollope were received and approved by fashionable society with complete confidence. Dickens, though able to fascinate all classes, was never so received or approved except by the goodnatured or stupid ladies and gentlemen who were incapable of criticising anyone who could make them laugh and cry Trollope and Thackeray could see Chesney Wold; but Dickens could see through it.⁴

The great artist was he who ripped apart the fabric of a corrupt society, and did not timidly conform to it. To Shaw, Thackeray was the representative of a conventional and outmoded bourgeoisie (a favourite word of denigration in modern criticism) which must be eradicated from the earth, and Dickens was the clear-sighted socialistic man who saw the necessity for such violent remedies.

This concern with the artist as rebel was the foundation - stone

⁴ Introduction to Limited Editions Club Great Expectations (Edinburgh, 1937), pp. viii - ix.

of the re-assessment of Dickens's reputation which commenced in the 40's. In 1940, George Orwell, measuring Dickens by socialist criteria, found many limitations in his social philosophy, which was essentially middle-class not proletarian or revolutionary and did not proceed beyond the desire for a change of spirit rather than of structure. In the work of Edmund Wilson, on the other hand, as in that of Shaw, Dickens was treated as a subversive writer. O'Faoláin's "great comforter of the nineteenth century" was established by Wilson as the man least bound by Victorian codes, "the poet of that portière and upholstered world who saw clearest through the coverings and the curtains."⁵ Wilson drew no comparison with Thackeray in his famous essay, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges", but it is clear from a comment made in 1947 that he saw in Thackeray a "bourgeois" and "Old World" novelist⁶ who lacked Dickens's modernity of social perception: "He cannot see society as a whole as Dickens was able to do, with all the paradoxes involved in its structure and the dislocations caused by its growth."⁷ There was no attempt on Thackeray's part to mount an attack on society or to attain to a vision of the distortions which it imposed on the individual. Therefore, for Wilson (applying criteria no less dogmatic or limiting than those brought to bear upon art by the Victorians), he did not warrant serious attention.

Although Wilson's essay cast Dickens in the twin rôles of "the criminal" and "the rebel"⁸, one of its centres of interest lay in the tension between these and a more conventional, optimistic Dickens.

⁵ "Dickens: The Two Scrooges", The Wound and the Bow (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), p.9.

⁶ "An Old Friend of the Family: Thackeray", New Yorker, 8 February 1947; rptd. Classics and Commercials (1950), p. 358.

⁷ Ibid., p. 357.

⁸ The Wound and the Bow, p. 15.

The novelist became "the victim of a manic-depressive cycle", unable to balance "the opposite impulses of his nature"⁹. It is this concept of psychological division which has fascinated later critics. Morton Dauwen Zabel, for instance, saw in Dickens a man torn between rebellion and conformity: "the principle of revolution which Dickens feared in its political and social consequences", he wrote in 1957, "had deeper roots in his make-up than his moral sentiment could openly admit"¹⁰. It was doubtless this conflict between public conventionality and private disorder which endowed A Tale of Two Cities, in Zabel's eyes, with "a stronger modern relevance than Thackeray's Henry Esmond or George Eliot's Romola"¹¹. The spectacle of a man divided against himself, avoided by the Victorians, has been dwelt upon by modern readers :

He came later, at the time of his readings from Oliver Twist, to have a clear and horrifying awareness of his split personality; he dreaded himself, and the possibility that he might be exiled by his own doing into the world of the murderer and the social outcast.¹²

... Tom [Gradgrind] and Stephen [Blackpool] express Dickens's inner conflict - his moral revulsion from a society whose laws are a prison, and his equally strong counter-revulsion (a rebellion compounded with guilt) against those who break its laws.¹³

These two passages are especially typical, relating to the Dostoievskian preoccupation which critics have shown with the idea of Dickens's "guilt".

⁹ Ibid., pp. 64.. 62.

¹⁰ Craft and Character (1957), p. 68.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 64.

¹² John Bayley, "Oliver Twist", Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson, 1962), p. 53.

¹³ Taylor Stoehr, Dickens : The Dreamer's Stance (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1965), p. 175.

Both Jack Lindsay and Mark Spilka have insisted that he was tormented by a sense of guilt arising, in the latter critic's words, out of an "incestuous longing for his sister Fanny and for the childlike Mary Hogarth"¹⁴, and numerous critics have explored the criminal implications of Great Expectations, discovering in Orlick's attack on Mrs. Gargery, and in the figure of Magwitch arising from the grave of Pip's father, mirror-images of the hero's own guilty, violent and suppressed desires¹⁵. The idea that behind the ordinary appearances of society lie violence and criminality, frustrated passion and longing, which strain for release and drive men into neurosis, has been of major importance in work on Dickens in the post-war period.

This willingness to discover in the great men of the past manifestations of internal dualism ought also to have benefitted Thackeray, but in fact, although some critics have recognised the divided nature of his consciousness, it has not endeared him to them. Lambert Ennis began his biographical study of Thackeray in 1950 with the statement: "The most important of all Thackeray's 'ambivalences' - to use that currently popular term - is the opposition within him of cynicism and sentimentality."¹⁶ But the remainder of this book, so far from making a claim for Thackeray as a great novelist on this score, seemed inclined to belittle him, while J.Y.T. Greig, writing in the same year, and tracing all Thackeray's shortcomings to a mother-fixation, was quite as

¹⁴ Mark Spilka, Dickens and Kafka (1963), p.53; Jack Lindsay, Charles Dickens (1950), *passim*.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Spilka, *op. cit.*, p.111; Julian Moynihan, "The Hero's Guilt: The Case of Great Expectations", Essays in Criticism, January 1960, x, 60-79; Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Mirror-Images in Great Expectations", Nineteenth Century Fiction, December 1966, xxi, 203-24.

¹⁶ Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1950), p.1.

irritated as the Victorians by the novelist's refusal to adopt a fixed outlook on life:

What he lacked was a stable and undeviating mind.

To the men of his own day he was enigmatic and disturbing; to men of ours he appears hesitant, irritating in his vacillations, even poor - spirited.¹⁷

It was because of this indecisiveness, Greig thought, that he had exerted less of a hold than Dickens over the Victorians:

the sage of Chelsea spoke for the majority of his contemporaries when he called Thackeray 'very uncertain and chaotic'. Dickens with his gusto, and despite much cheap jollity and still cheaper pathos, did more to shake the Victorian complacency than his saturnine, disjointed rival. Dickens hung together, Thackeray did not.¹⁸

Yet Greig himself had admitted that the latter had exerted over his time a "disturbing" spell, which must have been more insidious in its effect upon "complacency" than the more open methods employed by Dickens. By placing himself in the position of the Victorians, Greig indicated that he too found Thackeray not merely "hesitant" but "irritating" in the manner experienced by the novelist's first readers. In this perhaps lies one reason for Thackeray's failure to re-establish himself during the 50's and 60's as a living author. The dual nature of his narrative voice, it may be hypothesised, continued to play upon the nerves of readers. The pathological morbidity ascribed to Dickens (though not by Greig, who treated Dickens in a rather old-fashioned way) was perfectly acceptable, because it dramatised the eruption of dark forces through the surface of civilised life, a characteristic preoccupation of twentieth

¹⁷ Thackeray. A Reconsideration (1950, rptd. 1967), p.2.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.101.

century literature, and, later, of criticism. The warfare embodied in Thackeray's narrator, on the other hand, was not one of turbulence and terror but of weakness and melancholy, qualities which recommended themselves neither to Greig, nor to critics, like Wilson and Zabel, who valued the struggle of the revolutionary and the criminal against the pressures of society more highly than they did the vacillations of sentiment and irony.

The interest which critics have shown in the double life of Dickens, his outward existence as respectable bourgeois and his inner rebellion, also points to a possible explanation for the lack of interest shown in the comparison with Thackeray during the past three decades. It would have been easy enough for a contrast to be set up between the supposedly conformist Thackeray and the subversive Dickens, but this has never become an established feature of modern criticism, and the reason would partly appear to be that it has never been necessary. Dickens perfectly represents within himself the opposition of middle-class respectability and revolutionary disturbance, so that, in an age which accepts, and even relishes, the existence of mental fragmentation, there has not been the need to externalise this polarity. The moderns have found in the idea of the half-man divided against himself, avoided by Victorian reviewers, an ideal image for the dark discontents which underlie the superficial complacency of society - an image more suitable to their purpose than the antagonism of two separate men.

(ii)

The emphasis laid by criticism on the depths which lurk below the placid surface has a more than social significance. It is in man's

subconscious also that darkness rules, and it is for his contact with this lower region that Dickens has been most admired in recent years.

Robert Morse wrote in 1949:

Dickens has gone underground to that region where the mists of unnameable anxieties and the smoke of infantile terrors prevail.

for the source of emotional vitality he draws on the deepest mythology of mankind¹⁹

And J.C. Reid in 1961 :

Dickens is able to do something different from his contemporaries. He can, while writing a social commentary and a novel, also write a parable that calls up deep-rooted traditional responses, and he can, through archetypal images, maintain a link with the depth of the subconscious, reflecting the terrors and tensions of the human soul.²⁰

Myth and symbol have become for the modern critic the means by which the artist reaches down, not to the exuberant source of creation, as in Chesterton, or even to "strangeness", as in Machen, but to "terrors" which the conscious mind of man cannot deal with and often seeks to avoid. Yet, although a direct line can be traced from the late nineteenth century creed of artistic freedom, through the artist-rebel of Shaw and O'Faoláin, to the bourgeois-cum-revolutionary of the 50's and 60's, no such clearly marked line exists between Chesterton and Machen and the myth-making of later readers, since the approach which was made to Dickens's work by these two writers in the first decade of the century was not developed during the 20's and 30's, and the attitudes of

¹⁹ "Our Mutual Friend", Partisan Review (New York), March 1949, xvi, 278, 286.

²⁰ The Hidden World of Charles Dickens (1961 lecture, publ. University of Auckland, 1962), p. 22.

Chesterton were explicitly repudiated by Edmund Wilson at the outset of the Dickens revival. It is nevertheless plain that similarities exist between the two groups, and that Machen, in particular, with his interest in the subconscious, anticipated later developments.

Thackeray, more at home with classical allusion than with primordial terrors, offers little scope for this type of criticism. Dorothy Van Ghent, in her chapter on Vanity Fair in The English Novel (1953), attempted to discover in the novel certain images of horror, finding, for instance, in the spectacle of Jos Sedley offering his neck to the razor of his valet - though for shaving purposes only - "a complex image of a kind of fear so muddled, an image of a psychological state so profoundly irrational, that we react to it with an impulse of horrified laughter", and claiming that during the last senile illness of the elder Sir Pitt the serving-girl who nursed him had "full amplitude to scream obscenities and make faces at him"²¹. The interpretation of the first episode is, perhaps, a matter of subjective responses, but that of the second, on reference to Chapter 40 of Vanity Fair, is a distortion, since the nurse screams, not "obscenities", but simply "Hold your tongue, you stoopid old fool"²². Miss Van Ghent tried to modernise Thackeray to an extent he will not bear, and, because of his failure to meet her needs, her essay was often hostile to him. She criticised him for, as she supposed, qualifying the "frightening" world of Becky with the sweetness of Amelia, and ridiculed the final dismissal of Amelia and Dobbin to "solvency and neighbourhood prestige and a good middle-class house with varnished staircases."²³ She wished that, like Balzac, whom

²¹ The English Novel : Form and Function (New York and London, 1953), pp. 146, 151.

²² Centenary Biographical Works, ii, 60.

²³ The English Novel, p.142.

she praised, Thackeray had shown that virtue was not triumphant and had allowed evil greater sway. Vanity Fair, as a whole, did not contain the horror which she sought. The varnished staircase - her own emblem of respectability, not Thackeray's - was presented by the novelist as having a positive value, rather than as undermined by the amoral animality of Becky. Any serious vision of the depths was eschewed in favour of conventional comfort.

Paradoxically, one feature of the modern belief that the essential truths of human nature lie in the darkness which the Victorians strove to conquer, in "the terror that would seem to be more real" than "ordinary life"²⁴, has been that, instead of insisting on the littleness of man, Dickens critics have developed a new sense of humanity's romantic potential. Graham Greene's reading of Oliver Twist - "the nightmare fight between the darkness where the demons walk and the sunlight where ineffective goodness makes its last stand in a condemned world"²⁵ - illustrates the poetic strangeness found in Dickens's work. If the contrast between Becky and Amelia had been conceived in these terms, Vanity Fair would, almost certainly, have won a wide following from the 40's onwards. Myths of the beast, the demon and the abyss enable man to think of himself in cosmic terms, but the weak vacillations of a Pendennis and the sneaking viciousness of a Barnes Newcome are, perhaps, of little or no interest to, and might even discomfort, those who do not care to be reminded that man may be petty as well as bestial, feeble as well as vicious, and that all human indignity may not be of the poetic order. In a way different from that of the Victorian era, Thackeray may still be

²⁴ This quotation from Kafka's notebooks appears in Julian Symon's Charles Dickens (1951; 2nd ed., 1969), p. 90.

²⁵ "The Young Dickens", The Lost Childhood (1951), p.56.

regarded as a novelist who shows man as less than he is.

Again, there have been few comparisons between Dickens and Thackeray in this area of myth, concentration being focussed on the clash of "sinlight" and "darkness" in the novels of a single author. During the 60's, however, two contrasts were made which did suggest that it was possible for modern critics to see in the two men representatives of the two halves of the human mind. The first to see in the opposition a psychological significance of this kind was Keith Hollingsworth in The Newgate Novel (1963) :

Both [Bulwer] and Dickens are interested in the criminal as representative of black evil erupting from the depths of a human nature which is shared by all In the Oliver Twist preface, speaking of Nancy, Dickens uses the phrase, "our common nature." Bulwer can imaginatively identify himself with Eugene Aram; Dickens can do the same with Sikes Bulwer and Dickens . . . worked from springs of intuition which made them sometimes aware of the shocking affinity with the enemy. The man [Thackeray] who opposed them was a daylight temperament; for his art, he had not yet drawn from his own depths. In his onslaught upon the other two, in 1840, he was reason chastising the irrational. He could not sympathize with what they were doing, nor could they explain it to him. Their artistic effort, despite its fabric of realism, was symbolic and myth-making; Thackeray's effort was realistic.²⁶

Hollingsworth voiced the modern viewpoint on Dickens's criminals, though he ought to have pointed out that when the novelist talked of Nancy's share in "our common nature", he was thinking as much of the manner in

²⁶ The Newgate Novel, 1830 - 47 (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1963), pp. 224 - 5.

which she retained some spark of original God-given virtue as of her underworld life of prostitution. The doctrine of a "soul of goodness in things evil", so important to Dickens himself, was lost sight of in this passage, obscured by a concern with the "black evil" which lay beneath all human conduct.

Hollingsworth's antithesis between myth and realism recalled the distinction between Dickens and Thackeray made by both Chesterton and Machen, while his opposition of irrational intuition and reason looked back to the comparison between the subconscious and conscious in the work of Machen in particular. The Freudian possibilities of this latter contrast were more fully brought out by James H. Wheatley in his Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction (1969), discussing Thackeray's intelligence :

More intelligent, we must say, than Dickens, in the usual senses of "intelligent". If we ask, as the Dickensians are likely to do, whether Thackeray is as psychologically interesting, and especially whether his unconscious self was as powerful and "articulate" as was Dickens', the answer to at least the latter question must be no Yet if Dickens was in his generation the poet of the Id and Superego, Thackeray was the poet of the Ego: of the self scrutinizing itself ²⁷

This is a restatement of the conflict between instinct and analysis, couched in twentieth century terms. Hollingsworth hinted that the later work of Thackeray, like the early Dickens, drew upon its author's "own depths". This misleadingly suggested that Vanity Fair, for instance, sprang from the same "springs of intuition" that produced Oliver. Wheatley, more precisely, saw that Thackeray's descent into his own personality was fully conscious, and that it led not to the making of myths but to the dissection of moods and motives, based upon self-knowledge. Both authors were subjective, but Dickens's material was

²⁷ Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1969) p. 5

the darkness of the unconscious, Thackeray's the "daylight" (to borrow Hollingsworth's metaphor) of the conscious. Their methods, Wheatley implied, were equally valid, yielding insights of a different kind, so that appreciation of the one did not necessarily preclude admiration for the other. In fact, since Ego and Id were contained in every man, it could still be argued that, as in Victorian times, the novelists reflected the co-existence of two interpretations of human experience, not incompatible since both were in some measure pessimistic, but nevertheless addressed to separate portions of the mind. The point was not developed by Wheatley and has not been taken up by any subsequent critic - for though Juliet McMaster in her 1971 Thackeray. The Major Novels gives deserved attention to Thackeray as a self-conscious artist, she does not consider his relation to Dickens in this respect - but Dickens and Thackeray might, even in the 1970's, be treated (without denigration of either) as half-men, whose viewpoints must be combined in order to attain to a complete understanding of life. For this to occur, however, as much importance would have to be attached by critics to one part of the mind as to the other, and this, to judge by the imbalance between the number of studies produced on Dickens in the past ten years and those published on Thackeray, is not, at the present moment, very probable.

Several factors have affected the standing of Thackeray during the last three decades. At least in the 40's and early 50's, for instance, he was criticised - by such critics as Edmund Wilson and Dorothy Van Ghent - for intruding his own sentimental and moralising personality upon the autonomy of his story²⁸ (in particular, upon the vitality of Becky, which

²⁸ See Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?", New Yorker, 20 January 1945, rptd. Classics and Commercials (1950), p. 262; Van Ghent, op. cit., pp. 139 - 40.

was supposedly subordinated by her wholly Victorian author to the milk-and-water domesticity of Amelia). For the purpose of the present work, however, attention has been given only to that aspect of modern criticism which links Thackeray with Dickens, its preoccupation with the knowledge "that life within the daylight world is precariously balanced over unfathomable abysses."²⁹ In this concern with the depths of society and of the individual consciousness seems to lie an explanation, not necessarily the only one, for the almost complete disappearance of the Dickens-Thackeray comparison. Because critics of the 40's, 50's and 60's have discovered in the psychological tensions of Dickens's character and work a reflection of social conflict and of darkness concealed by the surface of the mind, they have not been interested in externalising divisions which can best be dramatised in terms of a single entity torn apart by inner repression and turmoil. Dickens holds within himself the "fierce encounters"³⁰ which now excite most interest. It should be added that, no less than in the nineteenth century, the emphasis has been placed more on one side than the other. No modern critic, for example, identifies himself with the bourgeoisie or suggests that the ordinary world is more real than that of the hidden terrors, any more than the average Victorian critic adopted the viewpoint of a cynic. Nor can it be said that the "daylight" world is even granted equal importance with its blacker counterpart. It could therefore be claimed that the ideas of mid-twentieth century criticism, for all their greater sophistication, are often, philosophically, as restricted as the naïvetés offered by so many reviewers between 1836 and 1900.

²⁹ J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens. The World of his Novels (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 321.

³⁰ See Leslie Stephen, pp. 4 - 5 above.

CONCLUSION

"'Dickery and Thackins'", Frederic Harrison informed a friend with some relish in the latter half of the 1850's, "are certainly undermining our principles."¹ He was thinking specifically of the two authors' social satire - of the Circumlocution Office and of the "wholesome" ridicule of "kings and nobles" offered by Thackeray in his lectures on The Four Georges (1856 - 57) - but his remarks bore a wider applicability than that which was intended. Dickens's descents into low-life, his taste for grotesquerie, his vision of an animistic atomistic world, his self-displaying mannerism; Thackeray's cynical undercutting of all pretensions to virtue, his refusal to acknowledge that man was anything but a socially determined animal, his subjectivism; the disregard for traditional notions of fictional form, and the lack of religious and moral principle, evidenced in the work of both men - each of these features struck at established authority, and united the novelists in common subversion of the public opinions of their time. Their similarity in this respect was one conclusion which could have been drawn from comparisons between them. Certainly Thomas Powell hinted that the cynic and the painter of the grotesque were alike in their distortion of human nature: "Becky is as cold and wicked - as Quilp is a monstrous abortion."² This perception of a resemblance remained, however, one of the few exceptions, and throughout the nineteenth century - and, indeed, during the whole history of the comparison - the emphasis was placed on antithesis rather than parallel.

As was suggested in the Introduction to this work, one reason for this choice was the comfort which could be derived, in the Victorian era, from the enactment of evil's expulsion by good. The pairing of two

¹ Quoted Autobiographic Memoirs (2 vols., 1911), i, 184.

² Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain, p. 105.

negative sets of attributes would plainly not serve the moral purpose of a clear-cut distinction between negative and positive characteristics, by which whatever was unacceptable in the work of one novelist could be corrected by reference to its opposite in the work of the other. Thus, instead of supposing that both Dickens and Thackeray, in their different fashions, threatened conventional standards, Victorian reviewers, in general, used the comparison to show that one of them was an upholder and the other an opponent of accepted truth. In this manner, pessimism, weak-willed dilettantism, subjectivism and social determinism, represented in the fiction of Thackeray, were ousted by hope, duty, objectivity, poetic universality and the freedom of the ideal, embodied in the novels of Dickens, while self-assertive eccentricity of character and stylistic mannerism, faults of Dickens's writings, were balanced by the truth to general experience of Thackeray's social types and by the well-bred purity of his diction. Nor was the habit of viewing one writer in positive and the other in negative terms confined to the nineteenth century alone. For Chesterton, no less than for his predecessors, the comparison was one of antagonism, the liberty and poetry of Dickens rising superior to the circumstantial realism of Thackeray. And, when it came to be conceived that a moral obligation was imposed upon the artist to rebel against his environment, the contrast could still be enlisted on the side of dogma, as Shaw and O'Faoláin - drawing different conclusions about the relative merits of Dickens and Thackeray from similar premises - showed. For critics of both centuries a comparison between the two authors proved useful as a means of setting out the antagonism between the virtues they approved and the vices, failures and shortcomings of which they disapproved.

It was also suggested in the Introduction that the practice of juxtaposing these two men sprang from the existence of suppressed tensions within the critical mind itself as well as from external clashes

of opinion. Masson, it may be surmised - and the argument is strengthened by his insistence on the "co-existence" of Dickens and Thackeray - would not have been so ready to champion the idealism of Dickens had the pessimistic realism of Thackeray, from which it provided a release, not found an echo in his own experience. Even Chesterton perhaps was impelled to his defence of Dickens by the sad knowledge that, as Gissing and Thackeray had shown, man was, in reality, the subject of time and circumstance. The supposition that the two novelists were in unreconciled and uneasy "co-existence" in the minds of their readers is supported by such points as the vacillation of Robert Bell in 1848 between unwilling admission of "the depths of a loathsome truth", revealed by Thackeray, and hopeful clinging to the Dickensian faith in "some redeeming feature lurking somewhere, under rags or tinsel"³; the anatomical imagery of Thomas Powell in 1851 - "One has most head, the other most heart"⁴ - and the seasonal similes of spring and autumn in the English Review of 1848⁵, both of which implied that the authors were naturally and irrevocably connected parts of a single organism; and, most explicitly, the decisive claim of the New Monthly Magazine in 1875 that "Thackeray completes Dickens"⁶. The "loathsome truth", which Bell confessed that "the best of us are willing enough to evade if we can", was present in the thoughts of Victorian reviewers in the shape of doubts about the dignity of man. Critics of the 50's - Theodore Martin, for instance, and J.R. Findlay⁷ - granted reluctantly that human goodness was invariably cankered, but wished that Thackeray had not brought the matter so persistently to their attention. Dickens, as the Family Herald recognised in 1868⁸, expressed the views which men were happy to

³ See above, pp. 160 - 1.

⁵ See above, p. 165.

⁷ See above, pp. 174 - 5.

⁴ See above, p. 195.

⁶ See above, p. 289.

⁸ See above, p. 194.

speak aloud, Thackeray voiced the secret thoughts they did not care to utter. The work of each embodied a portion of the total consciousness of the age.

Each of the areas of early Victorian thinking outlined in the first chapter was reflected in the differences which critics discerned between the two novelists throughout the entire century, but, on many occasions, as this dichotomy between public affirmation and private questionings would indicate, the oppositions which were pointed out can be traced back to the antagonism of optimism and pessimism which lay at the heart of the Dickens-Thackeray comparison. When Thackeray, for example, was accused of self-consciousness (in varying guises), the charge was indistinguishable from that of cynicism, since the flaw which marred the objective clarity of his mirror was his tendency to seek out the blemishes that marred every human happiness and virtue. The antithesis between objectivity and subjectivity was, as in Ruskin, inseparable from moral issues of love and blunted feeling, good and evil.

Similarly, all of the three major comparative reviews of Copperfield and Pendennis published in 1851, though each was written from a different viewpoint, reflected an awareness of the split between an interpretation of life based upon a sense of human potential and one founded upon a preoccupation with human imperfection. The anti-Romantic interest of the 30's and 40's - manifested in the Dickens criticism of that time - in subjects taken from everyday life, together with the modifying belief in the romance of reality ("Worth in low places" and the "soul of goodness in things evil"), led in the criticism of Samuel Phillips to admiration of the homely but sublime lessons of faith and endurance embodied in the lower-class figures of Mr. Peggotty and Ham, and this faith in human nature was opposed to Thackeray's deterministic depiction of man as a creature of the conditions of artificial society. In the

Prospective Review also the emphasis was (by implication) upon the practical virtues of the Dickens world, the domesticity and dutifulness of Copperfield being preferred to the weakness of Pendennis. In this essay Thackeray was associated not so much with the analytical methods or the materialism of the empiricists as with the sighings of Romantic introspection (albeit in a form less vital than that popularised by Byron), but the contrast between his work and Dickens's was nevertheless linked to the central antithesis of pessimism and optimism. In the person of his 'hero' man was represented as less than he was, while in Dickens's there was shown the reassuring possibility of self-discipline within the iron framework of objective law. Masson, on the other hand, though criticising Dickens for his failure to comprehend the Puritan element of "difficulty", was not interested, at least in terms of the comparison with Thackeray, in the responsibilities of the immediate world, which concerned both Phillips and the Prospective reviewer. Instead he showed (in a form repressed by neo-classical doctrines of selection) the Victorian tendency to move on from the romance of reality to the purity of absolute romance, tacitly admitting that the ideal was not, after all, to be found in the real. This division between the real and the ideal stemmed from a pessimistic response to life, but was not, all the same, totally dissimilar from the contrasts seen by Masson's contemporaries in the work of Dickens and Thackeray. Precisely because he did not look to life for human perfection, he desired an escapist type of literature which would offer pictures of men set free from the restrictions of time and circumstance, and perhaps even from the claims of present duty. His idealism, a refuge from determinism, differed from that of Phillips and the Prospective Review, in that it was biased towards imagination rather than morality, and sprang from an emotional need which was at odds with authoritarianism, but at the same time he

would have agreed with his fellow-critics, on very general lines, that Dickens enabled his readers to take a larger and more encouraging view of mankind than was allowed by his more circumscribed rival. In this separation of the novelists, he too created, in his own fashion, a distinction between the optimism of the one and the pessimism of the other. The opposition of ideal and real, like that of objectivity and subjectivity, or the real and the artificial, or duty and sighing dilettantism, related to the clash of faith and doubt.

There were, as the second chapter of this work showed, many occasions on which Dickens also - and this was as true during the 50's and 60's as in the 30's and 40's - compelled his public to gaze into depths which they would have preferred had remained unplumbed. This fact was ignored when comparisons were made - it would have destroyed the basis of comparison to have suggested that both novelists were pessimists - but it did appear in the disguised shape of the charge of mannerism. Objections to the contortions of Dickens's style probably reflected a revulsion from the darker, more grotesque aspects of his outlook, as much as (if not more than) a dislike of intrusion, though this was never consciously stated. The accusation of mannerism was thus a doubly moral one, and Thackeray's purity of style, severed from the impurity of its content, was endowed with an almost moral purpose. Dislike of Dickens's deformity of language was a tacit confession of his pessimism, but, because the comparison with Thackeray was made at the level of style alone, the publicly declared dualism of Dickensian optimism and Thackerayan scepticism remained unaffected.

This interest in mannerism was one indication of the extent to which the Victorianism formulated during the 30's and 40's was reflected in the periodical criticism of the early and mid-Victorian periods. At the same time, the fact that condemnation of mannerism probably often

arose from a distaste for the grotesque animism of Dickens's matter suggests that the full implications of the term had not been grasped. The intrusiveness of Dickens was obscured by dislike of his distortions of human nature, which were regarded as false but not explicitly ascribed to the subjective quality of his vision. The relation between the mind of the artist and the external world was never adequately considered in Victorian criticism of his novels. By choosing to dwell upon mannerism, reviewers neglected the wider question of subjectivity. Similarly, the self-consciousness occasionally attributed to Thackeray varied in kind from critic to critic, and no full definition of what constituted self-consciousness was attempted. Indeed, the almost total lack of concern over the first-person intrusions of a narrator whom the Victorian reader did not distinguish from Thackeray himself shows that for the majority of reviewers the concept of subjectivism did not even arise. They were always more intent upon the effect - moral impurity - than upon the cause - substitution of an individual outlook for the high objective truths of man's experience. Nevertheless, there was clearly a feeling in the air that self-consciousness was to be reprobated, even though there was no full understanding of its nature or of its precise perils. The attitudes of Ruskin and Carlyle were taken over - probably in many cases by men who had never read their works - and applied with no great degree of awareness to the authors of the day. It was generally accepted that certain qualities were good, others bad, and no need was felt to explain why this was so or to establish a frame of reference (whether personally conceived or derived from the philosophy of other men) by which critical verdicts were validated. James, when he repudiated the practice of authorial intrusion, had reasons, both moral and aesthetic, for doing so. In failing to develop their reasons, Victorian writers on fiction were, in James's own word, "naïf".

Naïveté was also a characteristic of the Prospective critic, who, adopting the faith in self-forgetful duty and in the attainment of the ideal through the real, turned his back entirely upon the self-questioning restlessness which was inseparable, in Carlyle, from any search for truth. Yearning Romantic introspection and speculative inquiry were subordinated by Carlyle to objective values and to certainty, but were nonetheless the tendencies which determined the typical tone and style of his work. In the Prospective essay, on the other hand, dogmatism was untroubled by such whirling undercurrents of thought and feeling, so that the reflection of Carlyle took into account only the end of his philosophy, not the means by which it was reached. Moreover, by suppressing the turbulence of the mind in favour of stern Puritanism, this critic denied completely the general relevance of inner division, though he did not deny that this was completely unknown in the modern age. This reluctance to recognise that man might be at war within himself was widespread in criticism of the Victorian era. Willing enough to view the struggle, whether internal or rendered in external form, of faith with doubt, god with beast, ending in the triumph of the principle of good, reviewers were less eager to look on man as torn between two opposing states of mind whose conflict remained unreconciled and whose importance was equal. The work of Dickens was at least as pessimistic as it was optimistic, but this co-existence of two interpretations of life was never publicly noticed. As much attention was certainly paid to one half of his outlook as to the other, but each part was considered in isolation rather than in organic connection with its opposite. It was nowhere stated that Dickens was a man in whom scepticism and hope, Quilp and Little Nell, were in tension. In criticism of Thackeray some regard at least was given to the presence in his novels of two moods. The Spectator, for instance, on the occasion of his death, remarked that

"the key-note of his genius" was "the yearning to believe, the difficulty in believing, that there is anything deeper than human desires, anything which should limit our grief and mortification at their habitual disappointment."⁹ Doubt and the wish to believe in something beyond the confines of the material world combined, according to this critic, to produce in Thackeray a state of yearning dissatisfaction which was (though, as usual, the connection was not made) akin to that of Byron and Shelley. But such attempts to see in Thackeray's mingling of satire and sentiment the expression of a total personality were few. It was generally assumed that, if his character had two sides, one was more valuable than the other and could be separated from it without violence. Just as reviewers avoided the perception of similarity between Dickens and Thackeray, so they seldom saw in either man, considered singly, an embodiment of the clash of opinions which was externalised in the comparison between them. This too would have destroyed the basis of comparison, for had the uncertainties of mind which brought forth the habit of contrast been given open expression there would have been no necessity to embody them indirectly in the rivalry of the two novelists. When the existence of the half-man, divided against himself, is not only admitted, but actually forms part of the thought of an epoch, as has been suggested is the case at the present time, the need for comparison dies.

As well as this failure to give due prominence to the internal dichotomy of each author, Victorian criticism also evidenced a lack of understanding of the background to the antagonism of pessimism and optimism, doubt and faith, intellect and emotion. Just as discussion of self-consciousness made no mention of Romanticism or German metaphysics,

⁹ "Thackeray's Place in English Literature", Spectator, 2 January 1864, xxxvii, 11.

so attacks upon Thackeray's cynicism, in spite of the frequent imagery of dissection and analysis, and the references to his habit of tracing virtue to diseased sources, made no link between his practice and that of science or Benthamism. Yet the similarity should have been evident. Nor, when Thackeray was set beside Dickens, was there any effort to relate the opposition between them to the dualism of intellect and love, empiricism and belief, which characterised the Victorian era until at least the 1870's, even though this should have been equally apparent. Whatever the reasons for these omissions, they are further proof of the lack of sophistication in Victorian criticism. At no time, in the articles considered here, was the novel brought into explicit connection with contemporary currents of thought. This might have been an advantage, had it meant that literary criticism was practiced in freedom from rigid categories of moral philosophy, but it is abundantly evident that the very reverse in fact obtained. The lack of open relationship between criticism and other modes of thought was an indication not of freedom but rather of the manner in which the values of early Victorianism had been unconsciously absorbed by periodical journalists to such an extent that they were used, without thought, as the yardstick by which, in one form and another, all artistic production must be measured. The influence of Carlyle, Ruskin and Maurice had been drunk in by their lesser successors as naturally as the air itself, so that men who imperfectly comprehended, or comprehended not at all, the philosophical problems of the century, and felt the need for certainties without admitting the existence of crisis, employed dogmatically concepts which represented solutions to problems they themselves did not realise but in which, as inhabitants of the same era, they nevertheless shared. The "spirit of the age" exerted a pressure upon them, even though at a secondary level. Perhaps the most depressing effect of this pressure

was that certain ideas, once taken in, were repeated without variation until the very end of the century, their reflection of living thought becoming more and more shadowy. The Victorian period was not, after all, one of stasis, but was continually evolving and changing. Oscar Wilde and Henry James differed substantially, even radically, from George Eliot, and she in her turn was a later manifestation of the Victorian spirit than Dickens or Thackeray. In criticism of the two latter novelists considered singly or in comparison, on the other hand, approaches barely changed at all. Leaving out of account the comments of a James or a Gissing, it was perfectly possible to hold the same opinions in 1900 that were advanced in 1836. Montagu Griffin had the advantage of historical perspective, but his summation of the differences between Dickens and Thackeray would have been perfectly in place in any review of the previous fifty years. Journalistic criticism hardened within the encasing marble of an ethos which was rigidly imposed but the reasons for which were rarely understood.

Perhaps, at all times, criticism is a secondary activity. There may be only a difference of degree, not of kind, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in this respect. The average Victorian reviewer caught from the air around him various notions which he applied, without explanation or analysis, to literature. The modern Dickens critic, a more conscious creature, is no less restricted by ways of thinking which are derived from outside art - from philosophy and psychology, for example. Jack Lindsay and Julian Symons have drawn copiously upon Freud; J. Hillis Miller's Charles Dickens (1958) tied the novelist closely to modern philosophy, while his more recent essay on Dickens, "The Fiction of Realism" (1971), takes its impetus from the linguistics of Roman Jakobson; and there have been many and various socialistic and Marxist interpretations of Dickens's work, of which John Lucas's

The Melancholy Man (1970) is the latest example. A close reading of modern criticism would almost certainly reveal a dependence upon social, political and moral values, no less close and possibly quite as restrictive as that to be found in Victorian magazines. It certainly seems to be true that just as Victorian reviews tended more and more to reiterate well-tried judgements, which soon became clichés, so modern Dickens studies have turned in upon themselves. Whereas Edmund Wilson, Morton Dauwen Zabel and Jack Lindsay, even though they themselves formulated no new philosophy, possessed at least the merit of originality in their application of twentieth century ideas to Dickens, many of the most recent writers, rather than drawing directly upon the ideas themselves, would appear to be guided by their predecessors, whose material they merely rework into a slightly different pattern. The bias of these works is therefore primarily in one direction, and the sense of disagreement to be found in Victorian reviews - albeit based on acceptance of similar moral criteria - is not to be found at the present time. "I have been listening to this discussion," remarked George Ford at a Dickens symposium, of which he was a member, in 1962, "and it seems so extraordinarily amiable There seems to be hardly any point for a disagreement. And it alarms me a little."¹⁰ This alarm is perhaps not without foundation, for, while at this date it is not necessary that there should be controversy over the overall and undeniable greatness of Dickens, a wider range of treatment than that at present accorded him would be healthy. Too great a degree of concord between critics argues that modernism, like Victorianism, is in danger of rigidifying, and it is to be hoped that the attitudes of the 1940's, unlike those of the 1830's, will not be struck with small variation throughout the remainder of the century.

¹⁰ Dickens Criticism: Past, Present, and Future Directions (ed. Noel C. Peyrouton, Charles Dickens Reference Center, 1962), p.52. The other members of the symposium were Hillis Miller, Edgar Johnson and Sylvère Monod.

Because the Dickens-Thackeray comparison embodied a polar opposition which was of central importance in the early and mid-Victorian decades, it is of especial value in determining the exact relationship between criticism and other kinds of thought during that time, since, in such a vital area, the reflection of contemporary preoccupations could be expected to be most obvious. The very fact that a comparison between the novelists became an accepted feature of the literary scene shows that critics were aware, at some level of consciousness, of the unreconciled tensions within their age. It also suggests, however, that they did not care to consider these tensions directly, choosing, though not with knowledge of what they were doing, to externalise them in the persons of two separate men rather than to treat them, as Masson almost alone among Victorian critics did, as co-existent portions of the human mind in general. This supposition is strengthened by the absence of explicit philosophical background in the reviews of the period, and particularly by the failure to establish a parallel between the wider conflict of love and empiricism and the respective characteristics of Dickens and Thackeray. Doubtless this omission was due in part to failure to see the connection or even to complete ignorance of the issues involved, but it is not improbable that it sprang also on occasion from unwillingness to face tensions which the critic had not admitted even to himself, and the existence of which in the Carlylean ethos had not passed into current coinage along with the absolute values which Carlyle set up as bulwarks against chaos. The Dickens-Thackeray comparison was a representation in miniature of a larger opposition, and this is one aspect of its interest. But it was also an imperfect and coarse representation, revealing that, while various ideas had filtered down to the level of periodical journalism at which most critiques of Dickens and Thackeray were composed, they were not derived from a direct

reading of Carlyle, Ruskin, Maurice and other major nineteenth century writers or, if they were so derived, were not based on careful reading. Often, it may be surmised, ideas which can be traced to Carlyle or Ruskin came to critics out of the air which composed that intangible entity, the "spirit of the age". This would not be true of men of the calibre of Masson, Lewes, Bagehot or Patmore, who would have read the major works of their period and in whose criticism Victorianism was often combined with originality and insight, and sometimes with unconventionality - Bagehot's 1864 essay on "Sterne and Thackeray", for instance, though in no way departing from Victorian standards, remains one of the most stimulating studies of the latter novelist, while the tendency of Masson's 1851 article, being away from realism towards the "ideal region", was also away from strict morality to some measure of artistic freedom. In the main, however, insight and individuality were in short supply in Dickens and Thackeray criticism. The comparison between the two authors is of interest because of its relationship to the clash of instinct and empiricism, and because it reflects the changes in fiction in the 1840's, particularly that, dimly perceived by those critics who contrasted mannerism with purity, and subjectivity with objectivity, from a mimetic to a more expressive and self-conscious concept of fiction. But it is also interesting because of the light which it casts on the intellectual limitations of the average Victorian reviewer, who was never alive to the full import of the antitheses he discussed.

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APPENDIX

The Authorship of "Popular Serial Literature", North British Review, May 1847

Traditionally, the ascription of this article has been to Coventry Patmore, though the identification has never been absolutely positive. The Wellesley Index cites two authorities, J.C. Reid's bibliography in his The Mind and Art of Coventry Patmore (New York, 1957), pp. 332 - 8, and Frederick Page's "An Essay towards a Bibliographical List of Coventry Patmore's Prose Contributions to Periodical Literature", in his edition of Patmore, Courage in Politics and Other Essays (1921), pp. 203 - 10. In the latter of these, however, the attribution is followed by a ? , a practice adopted both by the Wellesley Index and by Philip Collins in the New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, iii.

Dudley Flamm, in his bibliography, Thackeray's Critics, on the other hand, assigns the article to David Masson, without qualification. The evidence for this would seem to be Thackeray's own letter to Masson in May 1851, in which, before commenting on the comparative notice of Pendennis and Copperfield in the North British Review of the same month, he asked : "Did I not once before see your handwriting, in a note w^h. pointed out to me a friendly notice of Vanity Fair - then not very well known or much cared for, and struggling to gain a place in the world? If you were the author of the article to w^h. I allude, let me thank you for that too; I remember it as gratefully, as a boy remembers his 'tips' at school, when sovereigns were rare & precious to him." (Letters, ii, 771.) In explanation of this, Donald Hawes and Geoffrey Tillotson (Thackeray. The Critical Heritage (1968), p. 128) add the footnote : "The first three numbers of Vanity Fair were briefly reviewed in 'Popular Serial Literature', North British Review (May 1847) "

This letter is hardly conclusive proof of Masson's authorship. Thackeray made no explicit reference to the title of the review he had in mind or to its place of publication, and he was not even sure that it had been Masson who had drawn his attention to it. Nor, even if he was referring to "Popular Serial Literature", was he certain that Masson himself had been the critic in question, though it seems more likely that Masson should have communicated with the novelist about his own article than about one by another man. Thackeray began this letter : "I received the NB Review and am very glad to know the name of the critic who has spoken so kindly in my favour." This would appear to indicate that Masson himself had sent Thackeray a copy of the issue containing the Pendennis/Copperfield article, so that it was not improbable he should have done the same in 1847.

However, none of this constitutes firm proof. Nor does the internal evidence of the review itself offer any positive aid to identification. If Thackeray was referring to "Popular Serial Literature", the epithet "friendly" was not an accurate one. The reviewer praised Thackeray's "Quietness" of style and emotion and his freedom from caricature, but also mounted an attack on his prosaic handling of everyday material (see p. 159, above). Nevertheless, this latter point did link the article with Masson's desire to escape from "the Novel of Social Reality" in the 50's. There were several other similarities of viewpoint. The earlier critic's comparison between Thackeray's greater purity of "thought and expression" and "far severer taste" and Dickens's higher "power in delineating human feelings" anticipated Masson's contrast of Thackeray's "Horatian strictness and strength . . . which satisfies the most cultivated taste" and Dickens's keener susceptibility "to passion" (British

Novelists, p. 240). The interest which the 1847 critic showed in the maturing of Florence Dombey "in the school of deep affliction", and his objection to the absence of Christian religion in the depiction of her sufferings, also sprang from the same source as Masson's concern that Dickens was unaware of "the element of difficulty" in life, but much the same points were made by Thomas Cleghorn in the NBR of May 1845, and were hardly peculiar to any single Victorian critic. The same may be said of the condemnations of serialisation which appeared towards the beginning of the 1847 and at the very end of the 1851 article. It would be dangerous to argue for Masson's authorship on this resemblance, since other journals, notably the Spectator, criticised publication by instalments throughout the 30's and 40's.

Taken singly, none of these similarities would be sufficient to justify the ascription of "Popular Serial Literature" to Masson. Considered together they may nevertheless be taken to indicate a strong possibility of his authorship. Moreover, there appears to be no connection between this article and the known views of Patmore, represented by "Fielding and Thackeray" in the NBR of 1855 (see pp. 186 - 7, above). His opinion of Thackeray would certainly have had to improve considerably in those eight years, but this is by no means improbable, and it might equally be said that no hint of Masson's championship of the Dickensian "ideal" - except that contained in the objections to Thackeray's want of imagination - was evident in the 1847 critic's remarks on Dombey.

It remains impossible, therefore, to give a definite judgement on the provenance of this review, though it may be felt that the balance of evidence, both internal and external, inclines in Masson's favour rather than in Patmore's.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

All articles and books containing comparisons quoted in the text are listed in Section 4A, while those which include comparisons not quoted appear in 4B. The items listed in 4C represent, not a comprehensive bibliography of writings about the two novelists or of the wide range of work consulted for the purposes of this study, but a selection of the more interesting secondary material. Each of these three lists is presented chronologically, and items in B and C from which non-comparative passages are quoted in the text are marked with an asterisk. Unless otherwise stated, the place of publication for all books is London.

The abbreviations which appear after certain periodical notices cited in 4A, B, C, refer to the works reviewed, as follows :

AN	<u>American Notes</u>	LD	<u>Little Dorrit</u>
AP	<u>The Adventures of Philip</u>	LW	<u>Lovel the Widower</u>
BH	<u>Bleak House</u>	MC	<u>Martin Chuzzlewit</u>
BL	<u>The Battle of Life</u>	MPB	<u>Mrs. Perkins's Ball</u>
BR	<u>Barnaby Rudge</u>	New	<u>The Newcomes</u>
CC	<u>A Christmas Carol</u>	NN	<u>Nicholas Nickleby</u>
Ch	<u>The Chimes</u>	OCS	<u>The Old Curiosity Shop</u>
CH	<u>The Cricket on the Hearth</u>	OMF	<u>Our Mutual Friend</u>
CTC	<u>From Cornhill to Cairo</u>	OS	<u>Our Street</u>
DB	<u>Doctor Birch</u>	OT	<u>Oliver Twist</u>
DC	<u>David Copperfield</u>	Pen	<u>Pendennis</u>
DS	<u>Dombey and Son</u>	PI	<u>Pictures from Italy</u>
ED	<u>Edwin Drood</u>	PP	<u>The Pickwick Papers</u>
GE	<u>Great Expectations</u>	SB	<u>Sketches by Boz</u>
HE	<u>Henry Esmond</u>	TTC	<u>A Tale of Two Cities</u>
HM	<u>The Haunted Man</u>	VF	<u>Vanity Fair</u>
HT	<u>Hard Times</u>	Vir	<u>The Virginians</u>
KR	<u>The Kickleburys on the Rhine</u>		

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